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A Wind River Romance

by

Megan Breen Leigh

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
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Abstract

A first-person narrative adult novel explores the theme of abandonment with its residual and enduring effects, and its antithetical theme of loyalty that is continually tested and measured. The protagonist, editor of the local newspaper in a small, isolated agricultural community in the mid-1960s, provides the narrative nexus of two families. His is a community which is a mix of characters that are quirky by virtue of their natures or the remote circumstances of their existence. Both families in focus have treasure troves of secrets. Only after the appearance of a mysterious young woman and her subsequent murder do the tightly bound secrets of the families and the larger community begin to unravel. The narrator reveals his personal story as it relates to how he reacts and responds to the events at hand. Adding to his personal experience in the community, the narrator offers texture and enhancement to the story through archived newspaper articles and his interpretation of short silent movie reels chronicling the town's history from its earliest days until the end of World War II. Characters from within and without the

community assume disguises to maintain their lifestyle or achieve a nefarious purpose while other characters hide behind the falsehoods of their comfortable, everyday lives. The one honest character becomes a victim of his own purity, despite attempts of the narrator to intervene. Not until forty years after the events that changed so many lives is it safe for the truth to bubble to the surface.

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Chapter One

Angry black powder from thousands of firing muskets replaced the early morning air as Cyrus Erlewine took his last breath just after dawn in September 1862. In the company of a phalanx of dauntless Federal Army troops and surely an equal number of timorous fellows, Cyrus and I had trudged through the Miller cornfield near Sharpsburg, Maryland, not far from the Dunkard Church and only a short march from Antietam Creek. In the quiet before the clamor as Cyrus and I waded across the creek, he told me he might someday want to fish there, that its riffles and runs looked most promising.

Amidst the tassel and silk of mature corn mowed down by the march of warring men and countless bodies of fallen Union and Confederate soldiers, Cyrus rammed a ball down his rifle barrel, replacing the ramrod in one swift motion. He took that last breath and turned his head at the precise moment the conical three-ring minié ball from the Confederate Springfield rifle shattered the right side of his skull, nestling in the soft convoluted sponge that was his brain.

Perhaps he turned his head to look at me as I took position behind a mound of bodies still warm with waning life; perhaps he heard me call out his name in that nasty noise of warfare. More likely, what he heard as his dispiriting body deflated to the trampled, bloodied soil was his killer's rebel yell penetrating the grimy haze of battle. I want to believe that Cyrus Erlewine experienced no absolute pain in his finite moment of mortality, but only the exquisite sensation of hope.

Like a coyote emitting a high quavering cry at a non-existent moon, Cyrus' killer, a scarecrow of a youngster with pale-yellow hair that stuck out from his forage cap like straw, issued forth one more gleeful rebel yowl as he reloaded and started his cast-about for another Yankee soldier to put out of his misery. In that sanguinary cornfield when he became intimately and eternally linked to Cyrus Erlewine, the straw-haired soldier, draped in the counterfeit invincibility of youth, was unaware that I, Virginia Erlewine, had already fixed him in my sights. From behind a bloody, muddy hummock of dead and near-dead men some two hundred yards from the Confederate boy-man in his

too large butternut and gray uniform, I squeezed off a shot that ripped his rebel heart asunder.

I fled the battle along with a handful of other disheartened souls. Feigning familiarity with a dead soldier whose body was propped up against the trunk of a weeping willow as if he'd finally found a place to rest, I removed the blood-soaked rags from his wounds and wrapped one around my head low over one eye and another around my thigh. Not a single officer who flashed a look in my direction ordered me back to the front. As a severely wounded soldier I was more a liability in battle than an asset to the cause.

As one of many dead men staggering, I passed unnoticed through the tumult of the encampment, the distant pop and boom of battle sifting through the agonal lament of the truly wounded laid out everywhere. Managing to sneak into our tent at the regimental encampment a safe distance from the battle, I collected what few belongings Cyrus and I had brought and simply walked out of hell. After fifteen months of divine deception, my life as a Union soldier came to a bitter but easy end.

Cyrus was opposed to the idea of me taking on the appearance of a man just to be at his side to help put down the rebellion. Well, I said to him, I don't trust that you'll come back to me.

Cyrus said I should trust him and that it was his hope to come back with his head on his shoulders, two booted feet on the ground, and his arms dangling at his sides. Not satisfied with his safe return being hitched to hope, I dug in, anchoring my decision in what I knew was best for both of us as man and wife.

There was no doubt I could manage the charade. My father Johannes Caulfield seldom let pass an opportunity to declare that I was a mongrel-ugly child and the fact I had come into this world with female accoutrements was God's sorrowful joke. As a young girl, if any neighboring boy turned his head in my direction, his eyes would rest upon me only for a beat, never lingering long enough to consider the possibility of great companionship and unparalleled pleasure of the flesh.

Before Cyrus Erlewine ambled into my life I had spent my entire near-eighteen years on the family's Wisconsin farm. When I was ten years old our mother Esther Caulfield

slipped into memory on a moonless night, fearing, no doubt, she would never recover from the wounds inflicted upon her in the life she was living. As witness to an especially brutal beating from Johannes earlier that evening because his dinner bowl wasn't on the table when he came in from the fields, it came as no surprise to me that Esther woke me with a gentle run of her finger along my cheek. Her face battered, both eyes bruised and swollen, she leaned in close to me and whispered don't take no shit from no man. She stood up, slowly tied the ribbons of her heart-shaped bonnet under her chin, and stared down at me as if she may have been reconsidering her choice. She pulled on her gloves, picked up her carpetbag, and glided out the door as effortlessly as a seasoned skater on smooth winter ice.

I grew taller and stronger than my two older brothers, managing to outwork and outthink the both of them with little effort. My brothers and I shared a great indifference toward one another, and a potent and healthy mutual hatred for our spirituous, doddering father. We spoke to one another only out of necessity and sometimes not then, like the time older brother Curth neglected to tell younger brother Leland that he, Curth, had been

intimate with his, Leland's, sweetheart Ruth LeFors, a tall, skinny gal with rounded shoulders from hours of squeezing and rubbing away other people's dirt for a penny a piece on a washboard behind the Oshkosh Mercantile. Since Leland had never been on snug terms with Ruth, it was a wallop for him to hear the announcement from Ruth's own pouty mouth that she was with child and the begetter was none other than Curth Caulfield. Leland caught Curth off guard, beating him into a deeper state of stupid with the flat side of a shit shovel.

After Leland's revenge Curth was never the same, finding even the simplest task a monumental challenge from that day forward. Staying on the straight rutted path from house to barn was a daunting effort for the man. Since Curth was no longer endowed with coherent thought or speech, the brothers never spoke of Ruth LeFors again. What was curious to me was Ruth's intent. Since the brothers looked close enough alike, Ruth only had to do the deed with Leland, who was never good at cipherring, and birth a Caulfield baby. Whether it was Curth or Leland who sowed the seed in Ruth's plowed field, it wouldn't have made any difference in how that child looked upon arrival.

None of it mattered anyway since even six months after the shoveling of Curth, Ruth LeFors remained as skinny as a corn stalk. She'd been lying all along. When Ruth caught the wind of flapping jaws that Leland was heading to town with a shovel on his shoulder, she likely thought she may well suffer the same fate as Curth. According to reasonably reliable witnesses who were practiced observers of such happenings, Ruth LeFors slithered aboard a stage bound for Milwaukee with a satchel under one arm and her washboard under the other.

Not long after Leland's settlement with Curth, Cyrus Erlewine, a Bristol, Connecticut-born bindlestiff in search of a decent meal, honest work, and friendly conversation wandered onto our Caulfield farm on the very eve of my eighteenth birthday. He wore a clean muslin shirt, knee-patched wool britches, and a brand new coffee-colored John Bull topper hat with a shiny brown silk grosgrain ribbon circling its crown. Curth wasn't capable of gathering eggs from the henhouse without hiding them again in a haymow, so the honest work was for certain. For the decent meal and friendly conversation I suggested Cyrus depend solely on me.

I was smitten with the sad-eyed man five years my senior, and he was equally besot with his tall rough-hewn Virginia, my abundant bosom and gently sloping hips. Night after night for three months, I slipped into the barn and onto his bed of straw, coupling to the dark hours' music of mice, hogs, and horses.

Early in the morning by the waning light of a full March moon, I announced to Cyrus that he and I were officially and forever man and wife. Cyrus smiled and nodded in agreement as I climbed atop him and led him toward his heaven.

If ever there was a man to admire in this life, it was Cyrus Erlewine. Never did I hear Cyrus utter a disparaging word about anybody or anything—not weather, food, animals, crops, or the abysmal Caulfield men. With unruffled, good-natured humor, he accepted Leland's festering anger over just about everything, Curth's empty-headed existence, and Johannes's ongoing mean-as-a rutting-moose drunkenness. The men in that wretched family treated Cyrus little better than they would a shaggy pony mule. And he was none the worse for it.

It was soon after my secret marriage announcement that Cyrus heeded President Abraham Lincoln's call for all able-bodied men to help suppress the nation's rumbling rebellion. Cyrus proclaimed his intention to join the 2nd Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry. That's when I told him that not only would I remain his common-law wife, but I would become his brother Virgil Erlewine. Once he understood my intent, Cyrus issued a singular and quiet protest. He looked down at the ground at my feet and slowly shook his head right to left. Well, he said, you're the smartest gal I've ever known, but that idea you just spoke makes about as much sense as me tryin' to scratch my ear with my elbow. It ain't gonna work. And even if it did, I ain't gonna see you get hurt.

I cut my hair close, cinched a pair of Leland's britches around my waist, bound my breasts with muslin and buttoned Johannes's Sunday morning waistcoat over them. Cyrus recognized the decision had been made. He presented me to the recruiter as Virgil Erlewine, his younger brother, as dedicated to the state of Wisconsin and the sacred Union cause as he.

Before embarking on our grand adventure we had a *carte de visite* made by an itinerant army camp photographer who had set up at the back of the Oshkosh Mercantile, in the very spot vacated by the conniving Ruth LeFors. We were most handsome in our full Union livery—mirror images in forage caps at rakish angles, fatigue blouses with polished brass buttons, loaded belt sets, and bladed scabbards. It was the first photograph I'd stood for and the only image of Cyrus Erlewine I would hold in my hands.

We saw action at the First Battle of Bull Run under General Sherman in '61, the grueling Battle of South Mountain in '62, and of course the renewed hell of Antietam in the fall of '62. I kept a constant eye on dear Cyrus, who grew gaunt and distracted despite my efforts to keep his stomach full, his socks darned, and his feet dry. During the mind numbing days when we weren't in a lackluster skirmish with small bands of Confederates or marching toward a bloodletting, we managed to slip away from the rest of the regiment to find a secluded spot to rally our own hungry forces. Five days before the deadly encounter with the straw-haired Johnny Reb in Miller's

cornfield, we found a distant, isolated patch of grass shaded by the pendent boughs of a willow oak.

###

Our child was born in the splendid squalor of a flophouse in New York's Lower East Side just as the heat of summer bumped up against a remarkably mild May. Bucky Betty, a clubfooted, bucktoothed whore who said she had at one time practiced midwifery, helped through my labor and delivery with occasional forays into the alley or her own tiny room to ply her trade. I never knew her given name, but will always remember her generous heart.

The thought of returning with the girl-child to the Wisconsin Caulfield farm slipped out of my mind the same instant it entered. To willingly subject anyone, let alone a child, to Leland's hair-triggered temper and Curth's addlepatedness would be a sin impossible to redress. Johannes Caulfield was as despicable and ruthless as a rabid dog at the peak of infection. I would never set foot on the Caulfield farm again and cared nothing for the fate of those men. Not even the most tolerant or talented among us could put shine on that pile of shit.

In a gray hand-me-down day dress with a lovely linen chemisette from Bucky Betty, I set out to find a Connecticut family named Erlewine willing to take the child. With four of Betty's gifted hard-earned half-dollar pieces and Cyrus's coffee colored John Bull hat hiding my ragged hair, I made my way to Connecticut with the child swaddled in the muslin work shirt Cyrus wore the first time I laid eyes on his handsome self.

The journey in search of the girl-child's heritage was my first experience staging. It was the moment I pulled up into that crowded Concord coach as I cradled the child in my arms that I fell in love for the second time.

I am given to prayer only in the most extreme of circumstance, but that day and night I prayed the stagecoach ride would be endless. How sweet the music of the gallant horses grunting together as they pulled the coach laden with driver, passengers and possessions, parcels and mail pouches. The leather traces, metal bits, and horse hide moving with and against one another in unflagging motion. Playing counterpoint to the movement of the wondrous equine machine was the sound of the rawhide whip cracking above the team, the driver's paternal coaxing

of each horse by name, and his sporadic high-pitched warbling whistle. The swaying of the coach as we made our way from New York to Connecticut lulled the child to blissful sleep. I thought it would be the greatest of all life adventures to be moving constantly, observing the landscape slip in and out of focus from the pinnacle of a driver's bench, never lingering long enough for the sights and sounds of the sorry world to take a foothold. I couldn't imagine a better life to live.

The three Erlewine families of Bristol, Connecticut, would lay no claim to Cyrus, and for that matter, no connection to one another. Though they were guardedly hospitable toward me and the child, I could smell the familiar foul odor of bad family blood wafting from all three front stoops. One of the more socialized Erlewine men suggested I make my way north to Hartford where I might find several of the more errant folks by that name.

It was at that juncture that I began to question the genuineness of Cyrus Erlewine. If Cyrus had invented himself out of whole cloth, he'd done an admirable job. If he had been telling the truth, then the denial by his kith and kin was something of a dilemma of the first order.

When the Erlewine idea augured to the ground, it became apparent the child would have to be orphaned out. With Bucky Betty's money gone and the girl-child crying a good part of the day and well into the night with the insides of her stomach rubbing together, someone had to take the child. I could no longer be chained to her sorrow.

Smiles didn't come naturally to any member of the Caulfield clan, so it was something of a strain as I stood in the reception room of the Bristol Orphan Asylum attempting to fix a grin. The child was having one of her rare quiet moments. Miss Alice Mae Austad, Director of the Bristol Orphan Asylum asked what I called the child. By odd coincidence, I told her, the child's name is Alice Mae. Miss Austad, who was taller than my near six feet by a good two inches and perhaps twenty years my senior, raised her bushy eyebrows and cooed.

You understand that if I hire you as laundress, you and your Alice Mae must reside here at The Bristol, she told me, trying to peer through Cyrus's muslin shirt to catch a glimpse of her namesake.

I understand completely, I told her, and look forward to making a contribution of hard work and dedication to the Bristol Orphan Asylum.

The Bristol, she corrected me. We prefer to call it simply the Bristol. Asylums, she added, are for criminals, debtors, and the insane, not abandoned or orphaned children.

The main building of The Bristol was five stories high. With two dining rooms, three play rooms, two large sleeping rooms on the top floor, an enormous kitchen, a pantry, and laundry room it was a city unto itself. A pleasant, clean place with an assortment of children in varying stages of development would work perfectly well for the girl-child.

And where is your husband, Mrs. Erlewine, Miss Alice Mae Austad asked, still yearning for a glance at the child. Killed at Antietam in the great campaign, I told her. Before she could perform any mental arithmetic that might put Baby Alice Mae's legitimacy in question, I began to weep. It's been so difficult for Alice Mae and me all alone in this world, I cried louder. I managed a furtive pinch to

Baby Alice Mae's skinny arm so she might add her infant anguish for good measure. She didn't disappoint.

There, there, Mrs. Erlewine, Miss Austad said as she led me and the crying Baby Alice Mae to a fine red velvet settee where she directed me to sit only after she had spread a blanket across its deck—the seat obviously reserved for the more flush visitors to The Bristol. We always have room for the children of our fallen soldiers, she whispered.

Bless you, Miss Austad, I said. Bless you and bless The Bristol.

###

Baby Alice Mae and I had arrived at The Bristol in the autumn of 1863. Within a month of our arrival, Alice was a healthy and comely four-month-old baby with coal black hair, lapis blue eyes, a bud of a mouth, and cherubic cheery cheeks. I attribute her healthy aspects to Mrs. Spink—her first name I never knew—a most dedicated Bristol wet nurse, who hummed "Little Brown Church in the Vale" over and over while Alice or her milk-siblings suckled. To this day, that hymn brings to mind the image of Mrs. Spink with Alice Mae at her breast.

Alice Mae fast became the favorite of Miss Austad, and thus was given a certain latitude few of the other children enjoyed. She allowed Alice to scuttle along after her when she took to crawling, and toddle in her footsteps when she could walk upright. These were all good signs. Baby Alice learned to talk early; her nimble mind and agile, chubby little body dazzled everyone. I suppose if I had ever wanted the responsibility of a child, Alice Mae Erlewine would have been a good candidate. The older orphaned girls who cared for the Bristol infants during the day took on Alice while I managed the laundry room.

Since the stagecoach ride from New York City to Bristol, I had thought little of anything but my desire to explore the country on a stagecoach. More than once in the early days I'd had an overpowering itch to steal away alone into the night. But I recognized being almost exclusively in the company of woman was serving to mend the edges of my soul, worn ragged by an existence tightly twined with the gnarled roots of men.

I had accomplished far more physically demanding farm chores on a daily basis than doing orphanage laundry, but certainly nothing as frighteningly tedious. However, the

amount of laundry did prove daunting at times with anywhere from one-hundred to one-hundred and fifty resident children and a dozen or so adult employees. In the near stifling, steamy air of the laundry room with its enduring odor of soiled stockings, crusty underclothing, and urine-soaked bed sheets I worked with two of the older Bristol girls, Irish twins from Hartford who'd lost their parents and younger sister during the yellow fever epidemic in 1855. Siobhan, the older of the two by nine months and two days, and Kathleen O'Brien were a gregarious pair who sang Irish tunes while they scrapped their knuckles raw on scrub boards and built their forearms and biceps to magnificent size cranking the wringer-masher machine for hours on end, extracting the water from every piece of freshly laundered linen and clothing.

Siobhan was particularly fond of Baby Alice Mae, and she of her. She is so like me baby sister gone to heaven with me ma and da, Siobhan would say nearly every time she bent over to surrender to Baby Alice's chubby beckoning arms.

You can have her then, I'd tell Siobhan.

And when you're finished with the wee angel, I'll be takin' her off your hands then, Virginia Erlewine, Siobhan would respond with only a hint of a smile on her round sweaty face, and more often than not add, If ever there was a baby worth havin' it would be this one here. I sensed Siobhan had a suspicion of what lay in the back corner of my thoughts. Nearly every night Siobhan and Kathleen sang "Baloo Balerie" in Gaelic to Baby Alice and the other children gathered before their evening prayers, Kathleen's alto voice harmonizing skillfully with Siobhan's soprano.

When I left The Bristol a year to the day I first sat on the blanket-covered red velvet settee with the freshly christened Alice Mae Caulfield crying in my arms, it was with something of a light spirit dancing on a heavy heart. The life that I was framing would be difficult; to do it with a child would simply be impossible. I was not indifferent to the girl; she was as charming and refreshing as a whispery summer breeze. But never was there a woman born less suited for mothering than I. As absolutely certain I was of my inability to care for Baby Alice, I was equally convinced of the competence of The Bristol girls and women to provide for her.

Before the dawning of the day of my leaving, before the heavy aromas of simmering oatmeal and brewing coffee wafted up from the kitchen to the sleeping quarters, and before Baby Alice Mae could will her eyes open to gleefully greet her new morning, I scrawled a one-page note of thanks and good wishes to my friends at The Bristol. I left the note in the laundry room pinned to a stack of fresh sheets Siobhan and I had pulled from the clothesline and folded under the previous night's full moon. The five dollars included with the note would go a fair distance in seeing to the child's needs.

I left wearing Bucky Betty's borrowed frock and Cyrus's coffee-colored John Bull hat that I hadn't put on since our arrival. A curious bit of a shiver ran from the top of my head to the tips of my toes as I set it on my head. I hoped it was Cyrus's blessing sprinkling down upon me and not his curse. At first I wanted to leave something for Baby Alice Mae as a remembrance, but realized the child's memory of me would only be one of the many women who cared for her at The Bristol and that like the recollection of her father in my own memory, it would in

time pale and eventually dissolve to little more than a frail echo.

###

By the mid-1860s, in the masculine guise of Virgil Caulfield this time, I became one of the earliest and most renowned of the stagecoach drivers in the western territories that would become the states of Montana, Idaho, and Washington. The flat grass valleys, clear cold mountain lakes, and unambiguous and cloudless skies of Montana were my parlor. Exposed granite of sharp ridges and spires of the Bitterroot Mountains was my chapel. The rolling hills of the Palouse and the coulees and scablands of the central Washington territory were my back porch. Through the glory of spring and summer; the red, orange, and yellow palette of fall; and the deadly unrelenting winter weather I never regretted a single day or night as a reinman. I, of course, insisted upon driving my favorite coach, a Concord, preferably red with yellow trim.

Many an infamous and famous passenger made the trek in my coach. Charles E. Boles, a veteran who served under General Sherman on his "March to the Sea" but not at Antietam, was an affable and gentlemanly sort who rode with

me on no less than three occasions. A silver miner in Idaho and Montana who fancied himself as something of a poet later turned to robbing Oregon and California stages as Black Bart. Bill Miner, a friendly fellow by most accounts, found it far too easy to make a living by thievery. Allan Pinkerton, a tacit passenger I felt scrutinized my every move, rode several times over the years. Theodore Roosevelt, despondent after the simultaneous deaths of his dear wife and mother, made a trip from the Dakota Territory to the west coast and back in the spring of 1884. Teddy and I would be good friends who would meet again.

And the first class raconteur, Samuel Clemens, insisted upon riding atop on the bench next to me even though company rules against fraternizing with the driver while the stage was in motion were to be strictly enforced. Clemens talked unremittingly of Olivia L. Langdon, whom he insisted he would someday marry despite her requisition he refrain from smoking, drinking, and swearing—the only activities in life he claimed to have mastered. I suggested to Clemens that no man was beyond reformation, but he countered he feared he was among the great majority who, in the long run, just weren't worth the effort.

I thought I'd pretty much met and heard it all in my twenty years as a reinman until one autumn morning when an attractive, respectable-looking young woman boarded the stage in French Town, Montana. She wore a handsome bustled tawny-colored day dress with a high-collared black bodice. She was as demur and ladylike as any woman in the Territories. I had one other passenger that trip—a middle years man with a leather patch over his right eye attached around his head with a braided ribbon strap. He had a grotesque gurgling cough that would surely have caused even the most deferential folks to turn away. We were half way to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, when I heard thumping from inside the coach. Thinking one of the passengers was in desperate straits, I pulled the team to a stop, slid from the bench to the ground, and swung open the door.

And there was the respectable woman, her bustled bottom smiling at the roof, her bodice off and lacey corset open to expose her remarkably large breasts. Her mouth was wrapped around the one-eyed man's pecker like bark around a tree. His rapture playing to the rhythm of her movement up and down on his member accounted for his fist thumping on the roof of the coach. I was more than happy to accommodate

when he waved me off. Since they weren't in truthful terms violating the rule against fornication in the coach, I could do little else than climb back up and get moving.

The woman rode again a year later in the company of her new husband, a bespectacled accountant for the Anaconda Mine in Butte. When she surreptitiously flashed her wedding band at me and cast a furrowed glance as a plea for secrecy, I greeted her as if we'd never met.

Only twice was a Caulfield stage robbed. I was the sole witness to the first robbery. I had no passengers on that run, which was odd in that it was springtime when stage travel, absent the extremes of temperature and moisture, was roughly tolerable for most folks. I realized I had inadvertently left my pistol in the boot of the coach when a band of four robbers hit at dusk; consequently, I was forced at gunpoint to toss down the strongbox—the contents of which was estimated at \$2500—and watch helplessly as the highwaymen rode away.

The stage company was disinclined to believe the story. No highwaymen had ever operated on that open stretch of road between Billings and Butte. Moreover, the idea of Virgil Caulfield as helpless, even if outmanned and

outgunned, was so incredible as to strain credulity. At the stage company hearing to determine my culpability, I resolutely maintained the best witness to a robbery was the victim himself. Though I recognized the faulty reasoning of my own argument, the company accepted my version of the event with reservation, supplying me with a new Henry Yellow Boy rifle and the caveat that I keep it with me at all times.

The second robbery was the one most folks remembered because there were witnesses—an aging itinerant pulpiter and his much younger bride, a woman who bore an impressive resemblance to the fellatrix of the one-eyed tubercular man and the wife of the mine accountant. I got the advantage on the hapless highwayman, one Curly Bob Babbitt, known for his barbwire black hair. I squeezed off a shot from my reliable Henry Yellow Boy rifle that sent Curly Bob on his last trail ride.

###

By 1885, the railroad had snaked its way into territory where the stagecoach had long held sway. Staging companies and reinmen were rapidly becoming obsolete. The passage into the modern transportation age could not have

come at a better time for me, with a left hand crippled by decades of holding three pairs of reins, and a right equally enfeebled by constant grip on the hand brake. With money I managed to squirrel away for just such a day, I purchased 1280 acres of land surrounding a railroad wood and water stop called Wind River in the immense landscape of notable nothingness in midmost Washington Territory. The designation Wind River came not from a large natural stream of surface water, but rather the curiously constant wind that moved through the area like a river, mostly gentle and business-like but occasionally destructive. I built the Caulfield Hotel as anchor to the town of Wind River. That building I consider my true legacy.

The portrait of me that hangs in the lobby of the hotel is a three-quarter face, upper torso pose depicting me at age sixty-five, nearly sixty-six. I have, for the most part, managed to ignore that portrait of a clean-shaven, heavy-jowled, beady-eyed being with a barrel chest and disproportionately narrow shoulders. I hold my relic John Bull hat in my lap, trying to conceal my crippled hands. Please, know I am honored that the good citizens of Wind River commissioned the portrait as a birthday present

for me nearly seventeen years ago. Were I to happen upon this portrait as a detached and objective observer, I would deem the individual depicted as having the expression of one who wishes to give the impression of friendliness, but in truth practices a certain formality and propriety of manner with others. It's a wholly unattractive countenance with something of an orphic aspect. It has always been a challenge to see myself.

Since you, Jonathan Faircloth, my friend and trusted attorney, are reading this at the agreed upon hour immediately following my demise, probably with your dear wife Ethel at your elbow, I wish to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to you both for a golden friendship that took me by sweet surprise.

I hope you will properly prepare Norbert Beedle for the surprise that awaits him. If he were to wheel me into his embalming room without foreknowledge of the secrets buttressed by my intricately constructed corset, I'm afraid he might be so mortified he wouldn't be able to complete the task at hand. He and I spent all those years hunting elk in the Chelan wilderness area and he never tumbled to the fact he spent his nights in hunting camp with a woman.

He was always a bit agitated in that understated mortician way of his that I was the better shot. It will likely rankle him more to discover he was bettered by a woman. Please, prepare him first. Although watching Norbert's surprise at my pendulous breasts spilling to the side of my cold dead body, would be priceless. And knowing what a challenge it is for Norbert to hold the gossip of the dead, the entire town of Wind River and surrounding areas will know my secret within a day.

I wish to be buried as a woman. The gray day dress and linen chemisette that Bucky Betty gave me all those years ago is wrapped in brown paper on my top closet shelf. I know Norbert will have to split it up the back to fit it over my body. Let him know that is acceptable. And of course, please set that treasured and tattered John Bull hat in the coffin along with me.

I hope no one will think any less of Virgil Caulfield for being female. My guess is that public displays of indignation and condemnation will be limited to a clutch of our church ladies who fear the fate of the township will surely be vaporescence equivalent to the debauching cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. As is often the case with a

consummate ruse, most of our good citizens will whisper to one another that they knew or suspected my secret all along, but out of respect and fondness for me never acted on their suspicions.

Knowing your curious mind, Jonathan, I suspect you would like to know what happened to the mix of characters from the deception that has been my life. Twenty years ago I wrote to the county clerk in Wisconsin where the Caulfield farm was located. He responded with news that the farmhouse burned to the ground in 1885, and that Leland, Curth, and Johannes all burned to death in the fire. I had dull pangs of regret for Curth alone—who, since Leland scrambled his brain with that shit shovel, was likely as sentient as the chickens in his coop. Since no next of kin could be located, the remains of the Caulfield men were buried in the town cemetery with headstones that noted only their names. I allowed as how chiseling their names into stone was far more effort for the stonecutter than the three men were worth in total. The farm was auctioned off.

In the spring of 1890, around the date Bucky Betty coaxed Baby Alice Mae into the world some twenty-seven years earlier, I commissioned a discreet inquiry as to the

fate of the girl. She stayed at The Bristol until she was fifteen years old. At this writing she would be sixty-one, assuming she still trods this earthly plane.

As stipulated in my Last Will and Testament, you two will inherit equally the Caulfield Hotel and all of its trappings. It is the least I could do to honor our enduring friendship. I trust you will continue the hotel's grand tradition of hospitality and service.

If you wonder why I never revealed the truth of my identity to you, Jonathan, it was not because I questioned your trust or loyalty. You know as well as I that once a person gives up the mystery of his life, he becomes powerless.

Enclosed you will find the photograph of Cyrus and me in uniform. Cyrus is the handsome one.

I wish you well, my dear friends.

Respectfully,

Virginia Caulfield Erlewine

Wind River, Washington State

June 12, 1924

Chapter Two

The magic of Wind River is at first imperceptible; indeed, some who lived there but a short while or were just passing on the path to somewhere else didn't always recognize it. Oh, he or she may have felt something about the town was different all right, not bad, not necessarily good either. It was a curious charm that wrapped around an unsuspecting soul like the floating silk of the necromancer's cloak as it encircles, giving warmth and comfort, and yet, a degree of foreboding. I believe my beloved Wallace Kilcannon never fully understood the Wind River enchantment. He never fully understood his own.

The final image I hold of Wallace is that of a 1970 photograph from a Seattle newspaper, framed by an exposé of a state institution for the criminally insane, decrying its inhumane and archaic treatment of the inmates. The photograph, a pathetic tableau to suggest that even men decreed insane recreate, depicts half a dozen robed and pajamaed men of varying ages engaged in activities in the institution's spartanly appointed recreational room. Two men play checkers at a tiny table. One sits at an upright

piano with his hands poised claw-like over the keys while another rests his elbow on the top of the piano cabinet, attentive to the piano man below him. One man lounges in an overstuffed chair, a book propped open on his lap; he smokes a cigarette. And the sixth man, Wallace Francis Kilcannon, stands at a barred window. He has turned his head in the direction of the camera. His dark eyes bore through the lens, reminding me again how he could tie knots in time. I detect Wallace's gentle, comforting smile, and like the magic of Wind River, it is likely indiscernible to most. Six months after the photograph appeared, Wallace was dead. He was forty-two years old.

Wallace's life is so intricately woven through the warp and woof of this Wind River romance and that dreadful summer of 1965, that I am compelled to assemble him from his earliest years as he laid them open to me. His life changed forevermore on a September night in 1945, when his parents were killed in a truck-train accident. Francis and Molly Kilcannon and their two boys lived on a dairy farm in western Oregon until a war on the other side of the world fractured their idyllic life. While his older brother Callahan waged war in the Pacific theater for nearly four

years at places with names like Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Leyte, Wallace Kilcannon, barely into his teens, studied hard, daydreamed, and worked the farm shoulder to shoulder with his father.

Wiry and prairie fire fast, Wallace earned two high school middle distance track and field awards, long-lost blue rosette-with-streamer ribbons. He was an exceptional student with a mind-blowing memory that put him at the top of his class in every subject and kept the majority of fellow students at a distance, though he never spoke it, I'm guessing his fellows were likely intimidated and frightened by his mental prowess. During his first term in high school Wallace actively sought acceptance by his schoolmates, deliberately misunderstanding and misinterpreting all manner of subjects as he doggedly sought failure. Finding academic failure far more trouble than it was worth and realizing most of his schoolmates saw through the sham, he abandoned his effort.

However, at the end of his campaign for acceptance and weary of the title King of the Spelling Bee, Wallace left out the second "f" in *dieffenbachia* in the 1942 all-county competition so he would not once again have to witness

perennial second-placer Kellie June Montecucco's despairing exit and subsequent throttled sobs from the wings of the high school auditorium stage. Wallace admitted that Kellie June showed him a measure of tenderness after she was crowned Queen. And he admitted to a youthful attraction to the pretty flaxen-haired spelling champion. But at the end of it all, the missing "f" in *dieffenbachia* was the only thing Wallace gave up to sweet Kellie June.

As Wallace debated dropping the first double consonant of *dieffenbachia*, Cal bled his way to a Purple Heart and the Navy Cross. While landing with the 2nd Marine Division at Tarawa, a Japanese mortar shell exploded in a coral reef just as his amphtrack unloaded Cal and his fellow Marines. The reef exploded into millions of shards of coral shrapnel, one propelling into Cal's left ear, and as if the sharpest of surgical scalpels, punctured his eardrum.

Now to the last outing of Francis and Molly Kilcannon. The loving couple was headed home late one September Sunday night from a special grange meeting where typical agricultural and rural business was put at abeyance as celebration of war's end dominated the agenda. Wallace left the meeting early to peddle his bicycle home in time to

catch his favorite radio show, "The Shadow," which aired at eight o'clock. Wallace told me he remembered little of the apocalyptic night his parents died other than the title of that night's *Shadow* episode, "The Heartbeats of Death."

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows! The Shadow, an indomitable crime fighter who defeated enemies with menacing monikers like Kings of Crime, The Five Chameleons, The Red Menace, and The Black Master, was hands-down Wallace's favorite radio hero. The Shadow's unique abilities such as achieving invisibility and the talent to cloud men's minds were deliciously appealing to the Oregon farm boy.

Francis was behind the wheel when they pulled to a stop at the same unmarked railroad crossing they had traversed hundreds if not thousands of times over the years. The authorities surmised that a preoccupied Francis, thrilled to have his older son returning from the war in one piece, must have been deceived by a string of empty flatcars speeding past as he looked one-half mile beyond the tracks and train to the welcoming porch lights of the family's farmhouse. Thinking the train had passed, Francis pulled forward into the high-speed freight train. The 1935

Ford truck carrying Francis and Molly Kilcannon was sucked in and devoured like fast fodder to a ravenous leviathan.

Cal arrived home to bury the bits and pieces of his parents two weeks following the meeting of train and truck. Wallace held tight to the memory of waiting on the front porch steps of the farmhouse since before the rising of that day's sun, waiting for the return of the war hero. Cal came up the walk to Wallace, dropped his duffel bag, and wrapped his older brother arms around a sobbing Wallace, who wanted only to become invisible and cloud his own mind.

Two weeks after Francis and Mary's funeral, Wallace ran the three miles from the farmhouse to the community's hillside cemetery in record time, beating his previous time by nearly twenty seconds. Exhilarated by the run, yet spent by the effort, Wallace was blissfully unaware of the highly charged storm moving rapidly through the county. He remembered a blinding flash of light and a feeling of something ineffable spiraling through his being.

When he awoke thirty feet from his parents' graves, the taste of battery acid assaulted his mouth. The soles of his shoes had melted and several of his teeth were completely shattered. Beyond these measurable, overt

results of the strike, Wallace suffered a variety of symptoms from memory disorders, concentration disturbances, depression, and of course, an extreme case of astrapophobia.

Other residual effects were silent and difficult to assess. There was the ominous heart damage which went undetected, but beyond that were his bouts of "missing time," trance states, *déjà vu*, and sudden palpable fear which could only be quelled with great difficulty. But the most compelling and perplexing effect of 300 kilovolts blasting through Wallace's young body was the occasional visit from the departed Francis and Molly Kilcannon.

###

Alabaster Blue had been the sheriff of Wind River County just eight weeks when Rachel Wall's body was discovered on a hyperheated August day in 1965. Deputy Al Blue, just thirty years old and relatively untried, instilled a level of confidence and conviviality that had won him the election over the incumbent, Sheriff Earl Hamby.

Earl, an easy fifty pounds overweight with a lit Lucky Strike cigarette as a supernumerary facial feature, was a

heart attack waiting to wallop. At sixty-two, he was eager to spend his remaining days casting dry flies for cutthroat trout in the South Fork of Montana's Flathead River. By his own admission Earl was tired of the indolent interplay with the few citizens and occasional visitors who put the safety and security of the citizens of Wind River County in jeopardy by disobeying the law. Widowed two years earlier, Earl had fallen victim to a destructive lifestyle, his own apathy, and the distant siren sounds of the Flathead River tumbling south to the Columbia. Perhaps if the death of Rachel Wall had occurred a year before the election, Earl Hamby would have fought harder to keep his office. But it didn't and he didn't. By his own admission, even Earl voted for Al Blue.

"Rufus, I'd appreciate it if you'd come with me out to Stump Beach. I need photos of a crime scene." Al Blue stood silhouetted against blinding sunlight at the open door of my newspaper office.

"You can take one of my cameras, Al. The Bodine brothers set another barn fire or perhaps a purloined pitchfork?"

"That lady who was residing at the hotel, Rachel Wall?"

"Quite a looker, that one," I said.

"She was that, Rufus. She's dead."

As owner, editor, and provider of most of the reportage of the *Wind River Tribune*, my interest in Al's announcement piqued straight away. "Natural causes?"

"Suspicious," Al said still at the office door. "Dale Fallon found the body this afternoon. He flagged Steve down as he was heading in from his shift. Steve's waiting for us out there. I'd like to get the scene investigation done by nightfall."

"Knowing Deputy Luehrs' propensity to distraction, we'd better hightail it. I'll get my gear. Winona is roarin' to go."

"I can see that," he said staring at Winona in her usual place in the middle of my office. Winona was my customized 1937 Indian Four motorcycle with sidecar, painted a wickedly shiny black with chrome so brilliant it dazzled even in the dark. She was named for a lovely Dakota maiden I knew years earlier, a girl who had her own brilliance. "I'd prefer you came with me in the cruiser."

It'll save time," Al said, motioning me outside to his cruiser.

I tucked away my tinkering of the Friday edition of the *Tribune*, which caused me no degree of hardship. Although the paper's masthead heralded it as a semiweekly newspaper, I rarely published twice a week. Quite simply, the news of the township of Wind River and Wind River County didn't always warrant the time and effort of a second printing in any given week. Faithful readers forgave any delay if they could read a titillative article layered atop farm news, forecasted weather, recipes for Jell-o salad, and announcements of whose grandchildren were visiting from the backwoods of northern Idaho.

Whether it was the soporific nature of small towns hungry for any excitement, or the guilty pleasure derived from reading about unnamed friends and neighbors grabbling in print with problems unspeakably intimate, the most popular feature across the readership of the *Tribune* was the advice column *Ask Aunt Alice*. Though many tried to determine who the real Aunt Alice was, her true identity remained a well-guarded secret for decades beyond the deaths of the *Tribune* and Aunt Alice.

My renown came from being the only achondroplasian—dwarf—newspaper editor in the western states. Since no one had ever heard of any other four-foot-tall-with-change newspaper editors, the appellation went unchallenged. At forty years of age, with thinning blonde hair edging toward gray, blue, slightly crossed eyes in a continual state of bloodshot, and a gap between my front teeth that allowed for the creation of the most extraordinarily loud and piercing whistle, I would have been an anomaly in any small town.

What brought me to Wind River is one of those elaborate tales full of family and personal folly. I was born a scion of east coast privilege thanks to Father's business built on a pile of baby pooh and pee—Dandee Diapers, guaranteed to *Keep Your Baby's Bottom Snug and Dry, Day and Night*. We deep wintered in Palm Beach and summered in the Hamptons along the east coast of Long Island. I attended the best private schools and graduated with honors from Wesleyan College.

I have no authentic memory of my mother, Hope Pippin Dandee; she died when I was two weeks old. In his inestimable grief my father managed to destroy every

photograph and painting of my mother. I believed the only images of her to survive Father's sorrow were a handful of baby photographs and a locket with the tiniest cameo profile view of a very young woman that my maternal grandmother Mae Pippin wore always. After my mother's death, Grand Mae Pippin and her much younger sister-in-law Beatrice Pippin moved in with Father and me. Grand Mae and Pip took charge of elevating me to the greatest heights possible, as they were fond of saying. These two women taught me to think, drink, drive, smoke cigars, play poker, and romance women.

Grand Mae was lived in an orphanage until she was swept away in the arms of love and money when she was fifteen. My own mother was born fifteen years later when Grand Mae was thirty years old. After eighteen years of what was most referred to as a satisfying union, Grand Mae's husband, my grandfather, died of septicemia from a ruptured appendix.

During my first term at Wesleyan in 1943, Grand Mae died on a cross country motor trip in her much-loved 1927 Cadillac Roadster. For reasons I didn't understand at the time, Pip was unable to go along on that journey. Of course

Father insisted our chauffer drive, but eighty-year-old Grand Mae wouldn't hear of it. This was her second sojourn into the West and she'd driven solo before and by gosh or golly would do it again. Falling asleep at the wheel eight miles east of Butte, Montana, she and her roadster drifted off the road and into a field of fescue grass, hitting square-on the only tree within a quarter mile, a western red cedar reportedly unscathed by the collision.

Sadly, the trauma to Grand Mae's head from the impact did not lead to instant death. She managed to get as far as the ditch adjacent to the road. Discovery came hours later by a passing farmer who spotted a coyote holding a scavenger's wake over her body.

We managed to retrieve the map Grand Mae had used. A red-pencil circle marked her destination—central Washington, in the general area of Wind River. She traced her route on the map, recording each stop in her tiny precise handwriting, the time of day or night, the weather at the moment, and a comment. She had made a stop two hours before her rendezvous with the solitary tree in a Montana grass field. *Five-fifteen AM. Dawning of a memorable day of clear skies and easy roads. Pip and Rufus would love this.*

Such was my supreme loss.

My dream to become a doctor and ultimately a psychiatrist was surmounted before the ink dried on the medical school applications. Despite outstanding grades and my father Randolph Dandee II's assurance of continuing legacy to any school with the balls to step forward, and with medical schools so shortsighted when it came to variations on the leitmotiv of humanity, no school would admit me.

In an attempt to assuage my growing despair at persistent failure for acceptance to medical school, and knowing my lesser interest in journalism, Father mandated I abandon my childhood ambition of medicine and choose a town in the western states where he'd buy me a newspaper and I would become a latter-day Mark Twain. Although there were more than half dozen available small town newspapers with greater readership and more potential for profit, I felt a remarkable affinity to the town of Wind River and its struggling *Tribune*. I moved west in 1950.

Two years later, deeply despondent over the end of an *affaire de coeur* with a dreadfully young cashier at New York's Horn & Hardart Automat on Broadway at 104th Street,

my father ate the fulminating end of his .375 Magnum revolver. The revolver and a handful of bullets came into my possession. I imagine a survivor of paternal suicide would be better served to distance himself from the tool of termination, but such was not my choice. Wrapped in a red bandanna along with the bullets, I tucked the revolver away in a deep corner of my cluttered closet.

Despite initial insistence that she had no head for business, dear Aunt Beatrice Pippin took over operation of the family diaper business.

Thanks to the everlasting supply of baby pooh and pee, and Pip's extraordinary business acumen, I became a legitimately wealthy man as Vice-President *in absentia* of Dandee Diapers.

###

Deputy Steve Luehrs sat on a boulder some twenty yards from the bloating body of Rachel Wall. "Doc Nichols on his way?" Al called out to Steve as we made slow way from the cruiser toward the beach. Al tempered his usual long-legged pace to accommodate my shorter strides.

"Dispatch said he'd be here in thirty minutes an hour ago," Steve said. Steve was twenty-eight, good-looking and

bright enough for most purposes, but in a perpetual state of discontent. "Not even the common courtesy to be on time," he added.

"You'd complain if you were getting hanged by a new rope, Steve," I said. "I'm certain Doc didn't have penciled into his appointment book that he was to examine the corpse of this young woman."

A look of thorough disgust washed over Steve's handsome face. "Now, why'd you bring him, Al?" he grouched, rising from his haunches to his full six feet two inches and flipping his arm toward me as if he'd released a fastball low and inside.

"Good to see you too, Deputy Steve."

"I told you not to call me that, Rufus," he said. Ever since I neglected to give Steve enough press coverage when he was the uninspired second-string quarterback of the Wind River High football team, I had been struck from his list of people who mattered.

Al scanned carefully as he advanced toward the body at the pace of a stalking cat, each step carefully considered and measured. He motioned me to stay back by Deputy Steve. Rachel's face was turned skyward, her arms at

forty-five degree angles from her sides. Her body from the waist down was in the water.

"You get the camera fixed yet, or pick up the film for the Polaroid, Steve?" Al asked, his shifting clinched jaw signaling obvious irritation. Steve kicked up a puff of sand and swore under his breath. Al continued to scan the general area, not looking in our direction as he spoke. "Pretty obvious we need Rufus here then. You touch anything?"

"Nope. Didn't even walk down to ID her. Dale Fallon recognized her right off. Those are his footprints down there by the body."

Al turned to look hard and long at Steve. I thought for a breathtaking fraction of a second that Al would ask if Steve bothered to verify that the woman was deceased, but I was disappointed. "Where's Dale?" Al asked in that easy manner he had when he suspected the answer but needed confirmation.

"Said he had to take his wife shopping or something so I let him head on home."

Al shot Steve an astonished look that telegraphed his deputy really was a dumb fuck. "How did Dale spot the body from the road?" Al asked through a heavy sigh.

"He was headed into town to get some feed for his brooding chicks. Had too much coffee at breakfast so he pulled over to take a leak," Steve said. "Guess he saw her then."

"You guess? Better know for sure, don't you think, Steve?" Al said. I was relishing Steve's overt display of incompetence, but managed in time to whisk the snide grin from my face as Al looked from his deputy to me. "Rufus," Al asked, "You okay with this?"

"Letting Dale go before you could interview him, or photographing the body?" I'm certain I heard an audible growl from somewhere deep inside Deputy Steve where he tethered his robust ego when Al was about.

The most gruesome scene I photographed for Sheriff Earl Hamby was Jerry Parker's unexpected and short-lived alliance with a wood chipper. Jerry made it through the ordeal, but his right forearm came out the discharge shut in pretty fairly uniform pieces. I puked twice at the scene and twice again as I developed the photos. Perhaps in the

long of it, being rejected by the cartel of medical schools was a boon. "Doesn't bother me at all, Al. Happy to help."

Being something of an expert on Wind River's real and imagined past, I knew well the story of the town's only murder up until the untimely death of Rachel Wall. The year was 1925—the very year of my birth, interestingly enough—when the town's sole attorney, one Jonathan Faircloth, succumbed to the effect of jealousy and rage. These high stakes emotions seeded in the heart of his wife Ethel at her discovery Jonathan had taken to boffing young Caulfield Hotel maids in Room 105 off and on for a number of years. There was much speculation as to the extent of town founder Virgil Virginia Caulfield's knowledge of Jonathan's transgressions for all those years. Had he been privy to the assignations, I doubt that Virgil Virginia would have spoken of them to anyone. He was such a brilliant keeper of secrets that his own clandestine life was unclasped only after it ended.

The record doesn't reveal exactly how Ethel discovered her husband's propensity to weave his intrigue in and around any variety of hotel maids. In the alleged style of Fall River's infamous Miss Borden, but not the magnitude,

Ethel gave her husband about five lethal axe whacks to his bald head—the actual number indeterminate due to the severity of the trauma. The jury was far more sympathetic to Ethel's cause than Jonathan's bloody end, so she received a fairly light sentence for murder without malice aforethought.

I started shooting photos of the scene where Rachel Wall lay dead. Stump Beach wasn't one frequently visited; it was approximately a quarter mile from the road. The actual sandy area was small, perhaps only fifteen feet, with pine trees and fairly large boulders flanking both sides. Half a dozen long-ago-felled tree stumps cluttered the near water like randomly placed candles on a birthday cake.

"Was she face-up when he found her?" Al asked.

"I think Dale said he turned her over."

"Steve, did we attend the same police academy?"

"You know we did, Al."

"You *think* Dale said he turned her over? I'd appreciate verification of that."

"Will do."

Al motioned for me to join him closer to the body. I photographed from as many angles as possible. Rachel Wall had been a beautiful woman with short blonde hair, a finely featured face and admirable figure. Her tantalizing green eyes that at once reflected vigor and dubious intent were veiled by the curious scrim of death. Mud caked her mouth, nostrils, and cheeks. Her yellow water-soaked sheath dress melded with her flesh, clinging to her braless breasts. As lake water spanked the shore from the surface swells of summer boaters in the middle of Lake Lucero, Rachel's body moved ever so slightly as if waving adieu to those of us around her.

Al stood above the body, his hands deep in his pockets like a child forbidden to touch the merchandise. "She has bruises on her neck there, Rufus. Get as many angles of that as you can."

"Strangulation by means of--?"

"Could be soft or hard rope or hands. That's for Doc Nichols to determine at the autopsy," he said. "Since it looks as if the rigor has spread down her entire body, I'd say she's been dead at least eight hours. Steve, cordon off this area from the road to here and on both far sides of

the pine trees. Then block off the road for a half-mile in both directions. Get Ken Klock out here to help you. He'll be on duty in about ten minutes."

"You really think we need to do that, Al? Doc Nichols will be here soon and nobody uses this stretch of beach," Steve whined. "And it's fuckin' hot out here."

"If nobody uses this beach," Al paused, "What's this body doing here and how was it that Dale Fallon discovered it?" With obvious shaking of his downcast head, Steve made his way to his cruiser.

"Did I mention Steve being the kind of fellow who'd complain about a new rope being used to hang him?" I asked Al.

"Only one other time this morning and just about every time the three of us are together," he said quietly. He put his hands on his hips and took a deep, thoughtful breath. "You happen to see Miss Wall yesterday?"

I continued to snap photos as I answered. "Matter of fact I did."

"Where was that and when?"

"High Desert Saloon about ten o'clock last night."

"She with anybody?" Al asked.

"She was with me."

He turned to me and gave me one of his burrow to the brain stares. "You should have told me at the start line, Rufus."

"I suppose I should have."

Chapter Three

The Caulfield Hotel was boarded up after Ethel Faircloth pancaked her husband's cheating skull in 1926. In its halcyon days in the nineteenth century, the three-storied, four-gabled red brick edifice boasted an expansive Queen Anne style wraparound front porch that served as platform for many of the town's important events and celebrations. Views from top floor guestrooms of the Cascade Mountains, rolling green-to-golden wheat fields, and geological wonderments unique to high dryland plateaus were living landscape postcards.

Ethel Faircloth returned to the hotel following her release from the state penitentiary in 1936. Since she had sold the small clapboard house she and Jonathan owned next to the First Presbyterian Church in order to pay her legal defense fees, Ethel, as sole owner of the Caulfield Hotel, moved in. Though she certainly had a choice of any of the twenty guestrooms, she chose to live the remainder of her days semi-cloistered in Room 105, surrounded by the echoes of her husband's transgressions. By the time of her release, her health had become fragile, and according to

her own account had grown accustomed to confined spaces. Though she never opened the hotel to paying guests, Ethel entertained friends and neighbors in the hotel lobby, and on her rare ambulation on the streets of Wind River, she was as gracious and friendly as anyone's darling lace-hankie auntie.

Rummaging through the enormous archival collection stored in the desert-dry insulated room in the basement of the *Tribune* building, I happened upon not only the journalistic record of the township from its inception but also a number of short reel films—the fruit of the great feast that was Wind River. The films captured a good deal of Wind River County's events, citizens, and visitors from approximately 1910 to 1942. Buildings, landscapes, animals, farm equipment, parades, parties, automobiles, men, women, and children whose earthly existence was prolonged as one-dimensional artifacts on delicate celluloid captured my heart and imagination. Since I was to Wind River what Polonius was to Elsinore, sans his garrulous and intrusive manner, I anointed myself royal archivist.

I viewed and meticulously catalogued all of the one-hundred and twenty-four reels in the advent of a public

showing, sharing a few reels with a few trusted friends. The unknown and most prescient photographer, whose skill and artistry improved with each reel, filmed a placard at the beginning of each reel to note place, date, individuals involved, and significance. The first reel I screened was a shoot that took place on the proscenium porch of the Caulfield Hotel on a spring morning in 1912. There is no plot, just a *tranche de vie* in early Twentieth Century Wind River. The waist-high balustrade is festooned with patriotic starred and striped bunting. The principal players are Virgil Virginia Caulfield (as Virgil), Jonathan and Ethel Faircloth, an unidentified and exceedingly young hotel maid, and Theodore Roosevelt, as the Progressive Party Presidential candidate on a campaign swing through Washington State. Roosevelt's pince-nez glasses cast back the sunlight, making his eyes appear wide-eyed white and cartoonish. There is a surrealistic quality to the shades of gray images of these people as if every other muscle movement is skipped to hurry them along in time.

I found something curiously familiar about Virgil Virginia Caulfield. I wasn't certain if it was the way she smiled, rested one hand on her ample hip as the other

stroked the back of her neck, or how she threw her head back when she laughed the silent laugh of soundless film. Though not altogether unattractive, it is easy to see how she could maintain her manly persona. In the reel Virgil Virginia is involved in an animated discussion with a robust Theodore Roosevelt. They shake hands, laugh at one another, look toward the camera, wave and shake hands once again. Roosevelt heartily pats Virgil Virginia's shoulder in a friendly and familiar manner.

Jonathan is a bald, bespectacled little man, a good foot shorter than Virgil Virginia and clearly shorter than his wife. Ethel, with a docile countenance, stands to the right of her husband, her gloved hands folded at her waist. She is a thin dark-haired beauty wearing a magnificent flower and feather adorned Edwardian hat bowed at the back and likely a good eighteen inches in diameter. The young girl, in a crisp uniform with lace trimmed apron and peaked maid's cap, stands off to the side of the trio; she holds a tray of drinks. As Virgil Virginia and Roosevelt perform their antics for the photographer, Jonathan steps to the maid, takes one of the drinks from her tray, and raises his glass to her. After watching the film half a dozen times, I

was certain the girl smiles and winks at him. I would swear it.

The boarded-up hotel with its single resident fell into disrepair as ten years folded into twenty and twenty into two more. To the great relief and approval of the entire twelve-hundred citizens who lived within the limits of the Wind River township, not to mention the twenty-four thousand residents in the 1900 square miles of Wind River County, traveling salesmen, railroad crews, outlaws, and in-laws, politicians, and folks in search of safe shelter for a night or two, the Brothers Kilcannon, Callahan and Wallace, bought the hotel from Ethel Faircloth for the trifling sum of five-hundred dollars in 1948, and the promise that she could live in the hotel until her death, which came two months after the ink dried on the bill of sale.

Thus began the Kilcannon legacy.

Within two months of my arrival from the east coast in the autumn of 1950, I came to know the Kilcannons as family. Cal, the older of the two brothers was an unassuming war hero whose compass needle always pointed toward his daughter, his brother, and his hotel. At forty-

two, he still had chiseled good looks with thick brown hair threaded with gray and righteous dark brown eyes. His combined charm, intelligence, and stateliness made him a reluctant lodestone for local folks looking for advice and direction. As one of the few eligible bachelors in the area who didn't have dirt under his fingernails or year-old horseshit crusted on his boots, Cal did not lack for female attention.

The moment I was introduced to Cal's daughter Bridey I fell in love. Bridey was a toddling three-year-old when I wandered into her life. A kindred spirit in many ways, she mirrored my own intellectual growth as she manifested unusually early maturity and mental aptitude, reading and writing at three years of age and owning the sensitivity and depth of understanding of an adult. She grew to trust and love her Uncle Wufus, as she called me until she acquired a normal "r" speech sound. With shiny crow-feather black hair and green eyes that radiated warmth, she was a dazzling child and had become a stunning young woman. Her inability to recognize her beauty made her even more so. Who could not fall in love with Bridey Kilcannon?

And then there was the third Kilcannon, Wallace Francis, a man of such pure thought and deed that light filtered through him. He was thirty-seven years old the summer Rachel Wall's body was discovered at Stump Beach. Wallace was tall and muscular with black hair like Bridey's, soft cocoa colored eyes and long dark eyelashes. His face bore the gentle lines of character that served to distinguish his already handsome face. He and I were complete physical opposites, but never have two people complemented one another more. I was Falstaff to his Prince Hal; Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote; Jeff to his Augustus Mutt. Wallace and I shared a great deal in those good, long years of friendship, including the favors of Delight Daggett.

Hold on for more about our Delight Dagget.

Bridey was ten years old when I heard her ask Cal what he had done during the war. "That's not for you to know," he told her. Cal kept his war decorations locked in the hotel safe, bottom shelf, far back left corner, wrapped in brown paper and secured with white string—hidden away and hard to get at, much like Callahan himself. Though I never experienced it firsthand, Cal's explosive temper was

legendary. Wallace intervened when he could, quietly asking forgiveness for his brother's imperfect nature because of the war. Eventually, Cal's rage turned inward.

Woefully few photographs chronicling this short branch of the Kilcannon family tree survive. There was a small photo album held together at its spine by copper colored brads, its fuzzy black construction paper pages full of the places and faces of Kilcannon. Bridey told me years later that she looked through the album only once; she could never find it again. Her suspicion was that it may never have existed, that her child's mind conjured the album, wishing for a road map to lead her home. She found a Kodak Brownie Reflex camera among Wallace's belongings after he died, but never the album.

I assured her the album existed. On no less than six occasions did Wallace and I page through that family photo album. He spoke aloud every memory evoked by the photos of the family farm, Francis and Molly, Cal and Wallace through their early years, Kellie June Montecucco with her *Queen of the Spelling Bee* sash draped from shoulder to waist, Wallace holding his 4-H trophy in one hand and a rope around the neck of his award winning heifer Naomi in the

other. And of course, photos of big brother Cal, handsome in his US Marine uniform. I imagine Cal disposed of the album after all the heartbreak—much like my father destroying all the images of my mother that he could put his hands on.

Wallace carried one photograph in his wallet, a small photo just short of two inches square. From time to time he'd look at it through a magnifying glass. It was an image of Francis and Molly sitting together on the running board of the ill-fated Ford, flanked by the exaggerated swells of the truck's fenders. Francis has his arm draped over his wife's slender shoulders; they are lovely, happy people. A handsome, smiling late teen Cal stands next to them, his hands pushed deep in his pockets. The King of the Spelling Bee kneels a bit in the foreground of the photo, a melancholy look on his handsome face. It is as if Francis, Molly, and Cal are laughing at Wallace, perhaps teasing the reticent younger son to smile. The sun at the photographer's back casts a human shadow at the edge of the image. Bridey often wondered who cradled the Brownie camera, set up the image in the viewfinder, pressed the exposure button, and by so doing, became the unseen

imperative in the capture of a moment. Wallace could never remember who owned the shadow.

Through our years together Wallace, Bridey, and I were splendidly honest friends. The festering connection between Cal and me was anything but splendid, but perhaps genuinely honest. For the sake of Wind River generally and Wallace and Bridey specifically, ours was a theatric relationship of scripted civility from the beginning. Pinpointing the seed of our acrimony was like chasing a hat in the wind. I wish I could attribute the rancor to a deed undone or a word misspoken, the misinterpretation of a sidewise glance, barbaric behavior at the dining table, or banal male competitiveness. If it were that simple, the loose connection between us could possibly have been patched. He must have found the yawning difference between the profound truths of our daily lives to be horribly disquieting: a man who gratefully surrenders to his days, and a man who tenaciously assails his. The words of approval not passed, the friendly hand not offered, the humor not shared, all signs of Cal's disinclination toward me. His onerous tolerance of me was embedded in the affection Wallace and I shared.

Then on a snowy evening the week before Christmas 1952, came the revelation. Surrounded by the pleasing scent of a balsam fir Christmas tree in the corner of the school gymnasium and the respectful din of parents and children awaiting the curtain to rise on the all-school Christmas program—first-grader Bridey was one of the littlest ones whose non-speaking part meant wearing a cardboard, glitter-encrusted, star-shaped bonnet—Cal, Wallace, and I sat in silence. Whether it was the refreshing pine needle and fresh air fragrance of the Christmas tree or the three Tom & Jerrys I had before coming to the program, I was compelled at that moment to ask Cal what there was about the two of us that didn't mesh.

He was silent for a long minute as he stared at the closed curtains of the school's gymnasium stage, then finally he said it boils down to trust, Rufus. I asked if I'd ever given him cause for distrust. Not yet, but I sense you will, he answered. I suppose I can say the same about you, I told him.

The curtains opened to reveal three young boys as three robed and bearded wise men, laden with gifts as they trudged across the stage toward a cardboard manger.

Chapter Four

Miss Beatrice Pippin Makes Surprise Visit

Saturday, June 5, 1965

Wind River, Washington

Beatrice Pippin, President of the Dandee Diaper Company of Chatham, New York, arrived in Wind River late Wednesday afternoon aboard The Western Star out of Chicago. Her first sojourn west, Miss Pippin made the two-day rail trip to visit her nephew Rufus Dandee and to escape the sweltering heat of the east coast. Miss Pippin said, "I was weary of the east coast heat and humidity. Felt most days like I'd been rode hard and put away wet. So I decided to visit my dear nephew out west." Miss Pippin, Pip to all who know her, will be staying at the Caulfield Hotel. She looks forward to meeting all of her nephew's friends and acquaintances.

###

Sipping her New York Egg Cream to its tantalizing end, my dear Pip sat next to me on one of the six round cherry-red fountain stools at Woodcock's Drugs. Herbert Woodcock, Wind River's apothecary and perennial soda fountain jerk,

faced Pip on the business side of the counter waiting for her pronouncement. His wire-rimmed reading glasses had slipped dangerously close to the tip of his long-billed bird nose, serving to emphasize large white teeth as crooked as tumbled tombstones. Because of his unique appearance, Herbert caused flutters of fear in the hearts of the youngsters of Wind River, which didn't moderate as the children matured. Herbert, of course, wore his pharmacist's white lab coat and, when concocting fountain treats, a starched white soda jerk garrison cap. Herbert's dysphoric temperament kept most customers at arm's length, though I rather enjoyed an occasional wallow in his woeful moods and low spirits. A native Wind Riverian, he never married and rarely communed with anyone beyond the walls of the drugstore. Patrons knew never to ask pharmacological questions while he wore the soda jerk cap, and likewise never place a soda fountain order while he was behind the pharmacy counter. However, I believe one could successfully argue the medicinal value of his Triple Threat Banana Split.

There's a secret to enjoying the Egg Cream, Pip announced nearly every time she treated herself, was to

drink it down straight away; otherwise, you lose the excitement of the foamy head and the discovery of the chocolate velvet bottom. She slurped the last drop, slowly raised her gorgeous face, and pushed the empty glass to the edge of the counter. She released a deep, satisfied sigh.

"That's the best Egg Cream west of Brooklyn. Congratulations, Mr. Woodcock," Pip said. Herbert Woodcock, ever the gentleman pharmacist, bowed his thanks, removed his cap, and returned to his pharmacy window. "Actually," she said to me in an aside, "It was a bit heavy on the chocolate syrup, but one must always applaud effort, isn't that right, Rufus?" She dabbed at the corners of her tiny mouth.

"Indeed." I raised my milkshake glass in approval.

Pip didn't look her sixty-five years. Willowy, with a back as straight as a fresh fence post, she was a graceful beauty. Her ivory skin was soft and nearly void of the crepe papery texture visited on so many ladies her age. She warned always against frivolous smiling, frowning, or swearing, insisting that such manifestations caused undue strain on the face muscles. For all of her prim and proper,

Pip had a heart and soul as venturesome and promising as the dawning of any day.

To my knowledge Pip was in love only once in her life. Grand Mae told me the story of Pip's young man while she and I were sailing alone in Manhasset Bay, New York—prompted by my question as to Pip's personal life. He was a young diaper factory worker who shipped off to France with General "Black Jack" Pershing to defend the allies against Germany. It was in the Second Battle of the Marne in the summer of 1918 that Pip's young man succumbed to gaseous gangrene from an abdominal wound. That was all I knew of the story. Not speaking of the dead was apparently a family motto since Grand Mae had taken a solemn oath never to speak his name, and I was to be held to the same standard. Grand Mae referred to the young man as Pip's Darling and referenced her life as pre-Darling and post-Darling, as if her existence were a measure not unlike the linearly progressive timeline of archeology marked by major earth changes.

Pip spoke to my reflection in the back mirror of the soda fountain. "I would never use the phrase 'rode hard and put away wet'. I've never been ridden in my life," she said

offering a short-lived and nearly imperceptible rise to the corners her mouth. "I would much more likely say 'experiencing the continuing discomfort of eastern seaboard summers'." She paused, then looked directly at me and said, "You continue to be a man of invention."

I returned her gaze in the mirror. "An attribute you have delighted in for years," I said. "Now, tell me why you're really here."

"My sixty-fifth birthday is upon me in three weeks. I expect a party the likes of which your little Wind River as only dreamed," she announced.

"And you shall have it," I said with a gentle rap of my fist on the counter.

"Also, I have the information you requested," she whispered. "The detective delivered his report and I, of course, read it with great interest. Since I found it so intriguing I thought it might be a great adventure for me to hand-deliver it to you and watch how it all unfolds. One's attention to diapers can only last so long before interest wanes."

"You're something of a scamp, aren't you darling?"

"I believe I need another Egg Cream," Pip said, looking in Herbert Woodcock's direction.

###

I've savored every first in my life. Not that I wax nostalgic over first events or that they dramatically altered my path; indeed, I've trod so many roads to Damascus that I've worn ruts in every one. First car, first date, first sexual adventure, first broken heart, first heart broken, first pick up of a 7-10 split, first edition of the *Tribune*, first medical school rejection, first parental death—these and a myriad of other events light lamps in dark corners. Oddly, these firsts, depending upon their nature, grow more glorious or atrocious as the supple cord stretches from their moment to the present.

I had my first look at Rachel Wall as I sat in front of my Firehouse Building on a pleasantly idle May 5th morning. Just as she stepped off the two-level Boise-bound Scenicruiser Greyhound Bus onto the sidewalk, a Wind River dust dancer commenced rotating around her. The counterclockwise shaft of swirling air and debris confused her short blonde hair and clawed at the hem of her delightfully short denim skirt, offering a chance peek at a

fine cream colored thigh. Her untucked gauzy white blouse ballooned with life.

The bus driver removed her two suitcases from the luggage carrier, tipped his cap in her direction, stepped back on the bus and drove away. With a suitcase in each hand and her purse tucked under her arm, she disappeared into Woodcock's Drug Store and Soda Fountain.

The Firehouse Building was around the corner from Main Street on Alder, two doors down from Woodcock's. Flanked by the Firehouse and Woodcock's Drug like a sliver of prosciutto between slices of Italian schiacciata bread was the accounting office of Ardis Dardanell, CPA, who had her algorithmic fingers in the books of most of the personal and commercial financial accounts in Wind River, with the noteworthy exclusion of mine. Ardis's office once housed the law offices of the ill-starred Jonathan Faircloth, Attorney at Law.

Since my arrival in Wind River the two-storey brick Firehouse Building had suited my needs exceptionally well as office and home for me and Winona. Virgil Virginia Caulfield built the first firehouse six months after completion of the hotel. I was ever grateful she had a

vision, albeit erroneous, that Wind River's size and reputation would some day rival that of Seattle and Spokane. She built a supremely large firehouse for such a small isolated township. It was built to accommodate a stable for a team of horses, a coal bunker to power the steam pumper, sleeping quarters on the top floor, and an adjoining maintenance facility. It also housed the early day sheriff's office and town hall.

Wind River treasure reel Number 2 offers a glimpse at its early fire brigade. Dated August 1910, it's one of the shortest reels, providing a memorial to its two-horse drawn pumper as it sits at the open double doors of the firehouse. The pump, polished to such a glossy smoothness that it reflects near-blinding sunlight, is set upon a rough wooden box. The box is mounted on four wagon wheels—the back wheels grotesquely larger than the front. Along the entire length of each side of the box are horizontal hardwood hinges, that when pumped up and down by hand, force water out of the hoses. Three mustachioed firemen give a demonstration of the pumping action and its copious fluid output to the proverbially present Virgil Virginia and a gentleman identified as Arthur Posnik, who, with the

exception of his role in the reel as an interested bystander, is altogether absent from Wind River history. Standing to the side of the horses is a stately Dalmatian, its black spots seeming to leap from its white fur. Whether real or staged, there is a call for the pumper's service. Horses, firemen, apparatus, and firehouse dog fly out of frame leaving billowing dust clouds in their wake as Virgil Virginia and Arthur Posnik bid the courageous firemen and animals farewell with skyward reaching hands waving hats.

When a freestanding firehouse was built in 1928, to accommodate a new motorized engine, the Firehouse Building became The Gooding Funeral Home for a short period and then in 1935, The Wind River Bakery until the owner, Gunther Boremann, heard the clarion call to return to his German homeland prior to the outbreak of the war. It was reported in the *Tribune* that everyone missed his apple strudel and cherry kuchen.

The building stood empty until war's end when a returning veteran and his wife made a go of the newspaper for eighteen agonizing months. My father bought the eternally grateful couple's entire holdings sight unseen. The building was big enough to accommodate the offset printing equipment, dark room,

filing cabinets, paper supplies, and the delightfully gloomy but well insulated basement where archives of no less than four predecessors of the *Wind River Tribune* hid from the damaging effects of mischievous climatic conditions.

I needed little space for my writing staff, since, except for occasional contributions from readers, I was the writing staff. I spent the majority of my day on the phone, gleaning stories about who was visiting whom, what so-and-so served at whatchamacallit's luncheon, church news, marriages, births, deaths—the minutia of small town life that would make folks of larger communities wilt from triviality.

It was my morning habit, to slide down the brass fireman's pole from my upstairs sleeping quarters to the organized clutter of the newspaper office. I made the descent holding a mug of coffee balanced in the bend of my opposite elbow, never spilling a drop. I would stand at the bottom of the brass pole inhaling the personality of that magnificent structure. I refuse to chalk up what I smelled to my consummate imagination. The very genuine and delicious amalgam of grease, leather, hay, horseflesh and

shit, smoke, fine cigars, embalming fluid, calla lilies, rising yeast, baking bread, cake, and the splendid and irresistible smell of the printing press were unleashed for my pleasure every morning. The game I played with the building as I sipped my coffee was to isolate each and every odor percolating from the walls like water through sand.

On agreeable summer and autumn mornings and evenings I pushed open the high-wide double doors constructed to accommodate several generations of firefighting equipment; I'd pull out a captain's chair, mottled with long-dried paint splatters, to sit and get an angle on Wind River from Alder Street. I found joy in the desert zephyrs gently sweeping through the open doors into the newspaper office, rustling papers and wrangling dust motes into corners and under furniture, as if the building were inhaling to satiate a need for yet more life. Typically, a passerby would offer a bit of small town rumor or chat of a sensational or intimate nature I could possibly use as short news or information items to fill small spaces in the real news columns. I had no idea that when I first set eyes on Rachel Wall she would provide far more than filler.

"How much to take my suitcases to the Caulfield Hotel?" The gruff and graveled female voice startled me from my morning shuttered-eye meditation and meandering with my captain's chair carefully balanced against the wall on its two hind legs. I jolted to attention to see Rachel Wall standing two feet in front of me, bending forward at the waist to tease me with a peek, this time at the continental divide between her breasts.

"I may be short, madam, but I'm not deaf," I said. "Furthermore, I am not, nor ever will be, this town's beast of burden."

Rachel set her suitcases on the sidewalk and fixed a fisted hand to her hip. "I don't suppose there's a taxi?"

"A town that must fudge measurements to be two square miles has little use for a taxi."

"Where's the hotel?"

I pointed in a generally easterly direction. "You passed it on the way into town. At the corner of Caulfield Street and Main—one block over. Can't miss it, or rather shouldn't miss it," I said. "Will you be staying long?"

She picked up her suitcases once again and turned to leave. "As long as it takes," she muttered. There was no way I misconstrued her pledge.

"As long as what takes?" I asked, shading my eyes from the sun's glare so I might get a more focused look at her. She walked away without another word.

I was instantly reminded of my favorite raconteur, Mark Twain, who considered it an unwritten law for any citizen of a hamlet to regard a stranger as anything but an inferior being. This, he believed, was to make that person feel unwelcome so the inclination to stay on would be quelled and the insular character of small town existence undefiled. I had a sense as I watched this woman walking away from me that she deemed herself inferior to no one, and she was ready to stake her tent.

I settled back into my morning reverie, trying to decide which of the two feature stories I should run in the next *Tribune* edition when Ardis Dardanell stepped out of her office. "What was she all about?" Ardis said in her most mordant tone. Her ever-present Ticonderoga pencil cozied at her right ear. I always felt it was a prop and not a serious instrument of her trade since, in all the

years I knew her, the pencil never lost a millimeter of length.

"Tell me, Ardis, which headline piques your curiosity? 'Drainage Problems Ditched' or 'Viet Cong Offensive to Begin'?"

"Who is that woman?"

"I have no idea. The lovely lady asked for directions to the hotel. I think the drainage ditch problems along Hartford Road are of more immediate interest, but—"

"Is she staying there?"

"Despite my legendary diminutiveness I cannot climb into the heads of people. I neither know nor care."

Ardis flashed the mirthless smile I think she reserved for me alone. "Did you get her name?"

Without fail I wearied of Ardis The Accountant almost immediately upon onset of interaction. "She was asking directions, Ardis, nothing else," I said dismissively.

Ardis Dardanell had made no secret of her devotion to Cal Kilcannon since she first laid eyes on him. Bridey was a just a toddler when Ardis moved to Wind River from her home in the Methow Valley to open an accounting office catering primarily to farmers. She perhaps thought Bridey

was her ticket to marital paradise, as she made courageous attempts to nurture the motherless child. With her lack of imagination and penchant for order, Ardis was far better suited to the business of accounting than surrogate mothering. To a degree I admired her dogged pursuit of Callahan over the years, but pitied her blindness to the truth so apparent to everyone else.

When she first arrived in Wind River she was a trim and tantalizing bottle blonde that turned heads of even the most stalwart and cowardly among us. I must admit to a trifling attraction to Ardis which, being something of a female psychology maven, paled nearly as soon as it arrived. Despite a velvet voice that could melt butter and a gentle demeanor and ostensible naivety that encouraged the attention of many admirers, she could not uncoffin the heart of Cal Kilcannon. Sadly, her beauty was ephemeral. As the years yawned on she hid her frustration and bitterness of love unrequited beneath the hauberk of excessive food and drink. In her middle years she grew fleshy and her seductive innocence faded.

Though much less overt than in earlier years, Cal remained her ever-fixed mark. She constantly queried me as

to what the family was doing and when, how Cal was faring, would the Kilcannons want to come to her house at Thanksgiving, and how could she create the fourth angle of their family geometry. I believe she at once loathed me because I fit in so easily with the Kilcannons—two of them anyway—and tolerated me because I fit in so easily with the Kilcannons and could serve as her conduit. She could not or would not subscribe to the near undeniable probability she was destined to spend her days on the periphery of their existence. Ardis had been the Caulfield Hotel accountant for years, at, I am convinced, a compromised cost for the privilege of being close to Cal.

"You're looking particularly festive this fine summer morning, Ardis," I said, trying to change the subject from the freshly arrived female stranger. A sunflower-yellow ankle-length tiered skirt called attention to the multitude of middle-aged Ardis Dardanell. She wore a white peasant blouse with an elasticized top pulled as far down her shoulders as decency would allow. I took notice of her tabby and gray roots sneaking up on her chemically wearied blonde strands, but thought better of mentioning it.

"I'm having my annual backyard get-together this evening for all of my clients. It's a Mexican Fiesta theme this year."

"Wonderful. I just had my montera hat resized and my bullfighter pants mended from my last goring," I said.

"Such an outfit is better suited to a Spanish Fiesta rather than Mexican. Besides, you're not one of my clients."

"I could be," I teased.

"No, you couldn't," she announced emphatically. She adjusted her elasticized peasant top a bit higher on her right shoulder and then her left, as if I weren't worthy of exposition.

"You do know that I play flamenco guitar?" I said striking a stylish playing position, sans guitar. Ardis studied my stubby fingers for a long moment. I'm certain she was weighing my irritant factor against the possible musical ambience I could bring to her party. "I would, of course, have to put the next edition of the *Tribune* on hold while I spend the afternoon practicing. It has been a while since I last played."

"If you show up in toreador pants, so help me..." Ardis threatened as she disappeared into her office.

###

Annual Dardanell Dinner a Success

Friday, May 7, 1965

Ardis Dardanell threw her annual client dinner last Wednesday evening at her home on Rural Route 3. All things Mexican was this year's theme, which was perhaps more interesting than last year's casino theme, a challenge for most attendees relative to costume. You will recall that Dr. Frazier Nichols won the prize last year for his sandwich board design of the Ace of Spades.

Miss Dardanell, costumed in a lovely white peasant blouse and yellow tiered skirt, started this year's celebration with an invitation for all to join her in the Mexican Hat Dance for which she offered extensive historical perspective. In her usual gracious manner, Miss Dardanell spared no expense in putting together the menu for the festivity. Chicken fajitas, chili con carne, tortilla soup, rice, flan, three-milk cake, and a variety of salsas filled the large, colorful buffet table.

Margaritas, Mexican beer, lemonade, and soft drinks were available.

Rufus Dandee entertained with several original flamenco pieces played most expertly on his customized classical Spanish guitar. His music was received with great enthusiasm by the attendees.

This year's costume award went to Cledamae Howell, who came dressed as Joaquin Murrieta, complete with sombrero, serape, fully loaded bandoleer, and an elegant upwardly curved faux mustache. With the exception of this reporter and Cledamae, who claimed some distant blood relation to the man, no one in attendance knew or had heard of the legendary bandit.

For the second year in a row, the guest of honor was Callahan Kilcannon, who was recognized for his contributions to the Wind River community.

###

The Annual Dardanell client dinner wasn't nearly the success portrayed in the filler. I had considered devoting nary a word to the event, since it was in truth an abysmal failure, but at the last minute I needed to fill two-inches of screaming white. The food was flat, the margaritas

watery, the beer warm, the costumes uninspired, and the hostess tittering drunk halfway through the evening. There was, however, a tidbit that went unreported until this moment, years removed from the event.

Rachel Wall attended the event with Cal Kilcannon. Now, ordinarily bringing an uninvited guest to such an event was greeted with frail acceptance in Wind River's small town social bubble. But this was Ardis Dardanell's party and Rachel Wall came with Cal, the man of Ardis's waking and sleeping fantasy. Ardis demanded some accountability from me of all people. What's she doing here, she asked me the minute the couple walked into her backyard. I don't know, I told her. But they are a rather striking couple, don't you think? In truth I thought Cal looked about as comfortable as a man with a spiral shank nail pounded into the heel of each foot.

I'll pay you to find out everything you can about her, she growled at me. Ardis, I said, you know I never have been, nor ever will be, in need of money—thanks to my dear departed father and his trusty Magnum pistol. She told me she knew all too well my penchant for solving a mystery and this new woman was a mystery crying out to be solved. I

told her not to tack her hopes on this jackass's tail, but I'd do what I could.

###

A little about Delight Daggett is in order as I provide an account of that summer of 1965. Delight was the best mechanic within a hundred miles in every direction of Wind River. We tried to keep her talent a secret so as not to inundate her with jobs from outsiders. She had a sense about machinery that was so keen and perceptive it was a power preternatural. Her ability to listen, smell, and palpate the working parts of an engine, and by so doing divine a problem and set to a solution was uncanny.

I can attest to one occasion where she tasted a substance dripping from beneath an ailing engine. It's not brake fluid, she announced from the underbelly of the car to a handful of men bending over its yawning hood with expressions as eager as the seven faces in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolas Tulp*. She pushed out from beneath the car on the shop creeper rolling a substance between index finger and thumb. She touched finger to tongue and announced that it was nesting vermin urine,

likely a marten. In unison we straightened and looked away in disgust, never questioning her diagnosis.

Whether a tractor, a harvest combine, a '29 Plymouth Sedan, a housewife's MixMaster, a lawnmower, or the church mimeograph, if it was a broken machine and fixable, Delight could do it. And she would do it with demonstrable reverence for the machinery itself, stroking the working parts and talking to it as if she were commiserating with a best friend. She redesigned and fabricated Winona's pedals, seat, handlebars, and brakes to accommodate Rufus arms and legs. Delight was the only person I would allow to perform any maintenance on the old gal.

Otey Daggett, the first black man to settle in Wind River, was Delight's father. According to those who knew him, Otey was a great mechanic in his own right, but compared to Delight's magical and prophetic sense of machinery, he was a tenderfoot. Upon his arrival in Wind River from Alabama in '25, Otey charmed a former maid from the Caulfield Hotel, a lovely big-boned Norwegian girl who returned to Norway when Otey died of a heart attack while pulling an engine from a '47 Studebaker truck.

Being an eighteen-year-old mechanical sorceress, Delight told her mother *farvel og jeg elsker deg* and assumed ownership of Daggett's Auto Shop and the overhaul of the Studebaker engine.

I must admit to a strong belief that every woman in her own way is beautiful. But Delight Daggett was exceptional—the perfect blend of light and dark. Even with a grease smudge from cheekbone to chin and dirt and grime imbedded beneath her fingernails, she took my breath away, hollowing out a hole in this man's heart that has been impossible to fill. Tall with a tiny waist and full breasts, she filled out a pair of mechanic's overalls to become *such stuff as dreams are made on*. Her blended accent of Alabamian and Norwegian drizzled like amber from a honey dipper.

Delight was about the most agreeable woman I'd ever met and as a sexual partner she had a peerless appetite for pleasure. The marker of her agreeability was the acceptance of whatever and whoever cast light or shadow across her path. Perhaps that is why she so easily embraced Wallace and me, though never at the same time.

"Between Wallace and me, whom would you choose?" Years earlier when we were all fresh and new to one another, I posed the question as Delight and I smoked cigars and sipped scotch in front of the open doors of the *Tribune* office. It was a late night after extreme lovemaking on the floor of my apartment. To this day I can raise the image of her bare feet crossed at the ankles, iridescent pink polish on her toenails, grease-stained khaki shorts, and a white crocheted halter top that revealed her cream-in-my-coffee bare neck and back, divided in half by a single rusty colored braid that reached to the round of her bottom.

Delight considered the question with a swallow of scotch and a puffing and full rotation of her cigar. "Would that be for marriage, which one to toss from a crippled airplane to lighten the load, or guilt-free-at-will sex?" she asked more Alabamian.

"Indulge me," I said.

"The short answers are that I will never marry; *I'd* jump from the crippled plane; and neither one of you is that great in the sack."

"I don't know if I should be grateful or hurt," I chuckled.

Delight turned toward me. "*Jeg er en som er takknemlige, kjære.* I am the one who is grateful, dear. I love you both equally for different reasons."

"Are we any different from the broken-down cars lined up for your undivided attention?" I asked.

"*Kjæreste,*" she said, "There is no difference at all."

One of the last Wind River reels to be shot by the venerable cinematographer was the *Wind River Fourth of July Parade 1942*, and filmed in glorious, living color. He set up the camera on the corner of Main and Alder Streets, and from the angle of the shot, I'm guessing at an elevated height. Small town patriotism abounds with flag-waving children marching with pets in tow—dogs, cats, calves, chickens, goats, and one darling girl straggling behind the others, pulling a caged canary in a red *Radio Flyer* wagon. World War I vets advance in two rows of eight each. Several are in the uniform of the American Doughboy, one with an empty tunic sleeve; two limp along with canes; and one legless fellow is pushed in a wheelchair by a comrade with a patch over one eye. Without fail my mind's ear would hear the loose, resonant call of a snare drum as a single Boy Scout enters the frame, beating cadence as he follows

behind the veterans. The lad wears the standard issue wide-brimmed Scouting hat, shirt with triangular neckerchief, knee socks and shorts that offer a frightening and fortunately fleeting view of what surely must have been the knobbyest knees in his troop.

Following close behind young Knobby Knees is an open air touring car with a red, white, and blue bunting draped across its grillwork and a side banner that reads *Daggett Auto Shop*. A broad-shouldered black man, sporting ivy cap and driving smock, sits behind the wheel. He smiles warmly, returning the enthusiastic waves of folks lining the sidewalk on both sides of the parade route. In the passenger seat is a fair-haired beauty waving as ardently as the driver. And in the backseat is the view of the top of a child's head and the ends of long braids held arms-straight into the air like the horns of a Nordic warrior helmet.

The camera swings to follow the backend view of the touring car's progression down Main Street. Twelve-year-old Delight Daggett's head and shoulders snap up like a prairie dog popping out of its burrow for a reconnoiter. Delight

looks back from whence she came, to the left, to the right,
smiles and then disappears once again into the vehicle.

Chapter Five

One month before Rachel Wall was murdered she sat in the hotel lobby reading the July 18, 1965, edition of the *Wind River Tribune*. I remember the headline as clearly as if I'd written it this very morning: *Mariner IV Sends Back 1st Pictures of Mars*. The historic headline screamed above the fold in the largest Times New Roman font I could manage. Certainly not the typical Wind River headline, but significant enough to bump the price of chicken feed and soil quality testing in the Wind River Valley.

After being in town for a month and a half, Rachel had assumed the demeanor of a long term Wind Riverian, something ordinarily earned, not taken. She sat in one of the newly upholstered French wingback chairs bookending the hotel lobby fireplace, her sandaled feet propped up on the coffee table in a most unladylike posture. In the spring of that year, Bridey and I had chosen the fabric for the chairs—a delicious chintz floral pastiche of pink, tomato, and pomegranate-red on a butter cream background. I'll hate it when anybody sits in them, Rufus, Bridey said as we arranged the freshly rehabilitated chairs. Sweetheart, I

told her, you know that with time the rich colors will fade, and these chairs will once again meld into the overpowering hardwood landscape of this lobby, and by then you won't give a damn.

From the lobby ceiling hung an enormous electrified wagon wheel chandelier with clear chimney globes, not a fixture unique in old western hotels, but this one claimed an interesting artifact. An Indian arrow angled through a spoke and into the hub, its shaft, fletching, and bone arrowhead as pristine as the day it was manufactured by some eager young brave. The story tagged to the fixture was that it was an actual wagon wheel from a stage that Virgil Virginia drove through hostile Indian Territory in the 1880s. I viewed the tale as another one of the apocryphal anecdotes attributed to, or by, Virgil Virginia. One must consider that most hostilities had ended by the 1880s, lugging around a wagon wheel hoping one day to suspend it from a ceiling to illuminate a room is highly unlikely, and the obvious problems of trajectory and aerodynamics led me to believe the provenance of the arrow was a pile of piffle.

Above the fireplace hung a large Frederic Remington painting commissioned by Virgil Virginia in 1900. It offered a rendering of a red, yellow-trimmed Concord stagecoach that appears to fly down a rugged mountain road with a single driver holding fast to the reins of a six-horse team. In the background is a mounted group of men, highwaymen with pistols pulled and aimed to waylay the stage for its riches. The homage to Virgil Virginia Caulfield's life on a stage bench had never been removed from its place above the mantle.

I sat on a high stool behind the lobby desk, lingering over my second cup of coffee of the morning as I waited for Wallace and my day to unfold. Bridey strolled through the lobby toward the stairs; she wore her usual summer ensemble of cutoff jeans and T-shirt. Ostensibly, she counted the freshly laundered and folded white towels cradled in her left arm, but I saw her throw a quick glance at the soles of Rachel's sandals on public display. Bridey's disapproval was reflected in a near imperceptible glower.

"Who writes this drivel?" Rachel asked as she collapsed the newspaper in her lap. I believe in her short tenure in Wind River her voice had actually become more

graveled, as if she'd swallowed additional rock fragments or pebbles to be disturb as her words made their tortuous journey into the world.

"Excuse me?" Bridey said.

"This ridiculous advice column, *Ask Aunt Alice*. I've never read such ludicrous advice."

This, of course, raised the hackles on the back of my newspaperman's neck. "Actually, the identity of Aunt Alice is a secret," I said from across the lobby.

"My guess is that you're Aunt Alice, squirt." For some unfathomable reason Rachel had taken to calling me *squirt*, a repugnant appellation that deserved no rejoinder.

Bridey piped in, "He couldn't be."

"And you know this for sure?" Rachel said.

"Well, the advice is so solid and nurturing, that he couldn't possibly be Aunt Alice. No offense, Rufus."

"None taken, little sister."

Rachel snapped up the newspaper and read in a tinny, condescending voice, "'Dear Aunt Alice, There's a woman in our quilting circle who constantly criticizes my technique. She announces to everyone that my stitches are uneven, that I skip stitches, my knots are visible, and my fabric

puckered. I'm tired of this woman and her accusations. What am I to do? I love my circle friends, and don't want to quit. Please help me. Signed, The Desperate Quilter.' And here's the response—"

"I remember." Bridey paused. "Aunt Alice said that it is far easier to be a critic than a craftsman. She suggested that Desperate Quilter take the other circle member aside and tell her how uncomfortable she is with her public criticism and she would appreciate any suggestions she might have to improve be made in private. You see, Rufus would never say anything as thoughtful and sensible."

"Thank you," I said as I bowed toward Bridey.

"And you think this would solve the problem?" Rachel challenged, snapping the newspaper with the back of her hand.

I couldn't help myself. "What would you advise, Miss Wall, if someone suggested that you had puckered fabric?"

"Revenge can be most pleasurable," she said flatly.

"Isn't it the anticipation of revenge rather than the act itself that we find pleasurable?" I baited. "And do tell me what you think of the pictures from Mars."

Clearly unable or unwilling to make comment regarding the fourth planet from the sun, Rachel carelessly folded the newspaper and tossed it on the coffee table already jumbled with her morning coffee and condiments, purse, and butt cluttered ashtray. "You work too hard," Rachel said in Bridey's general direction. "I've watched you do nothing but scamper from here to there in the two and a half months I've been here. Your daddy just works you to death. Don't you ever have any fun?"

Bridey responded after some thought. "I watched *Bonanza* last night with Wallace and Rufus."

"A girl like you should find better things to do with her evenings than spend time with a couple of," Rachel paused, casting a look in my direction as if reflecting on the pernicious thoughts about to inform her words. "A couple of middle-aged men."

Bridey knit her brows and cast a most disparaging look in Rachel's direction. "I like spending time with them."

Rachel continued, "I could never understand that TV show. All those men and no woman within miles. How convenient that all of Ben Cartwright's wives died."

"Indeed, a boon to the boys of the Ponderosa," I said more to myself than the ladies.

"Sometimes there's no accounting for taste," Rachel said, her gaze bounced again in my direction.

"Michael Landon's cute," Bridey said softly.

Apparently off the Ponderosa, Rachel dug in the cavity of her purse, withdrew a cigarette and lit it with the smooth mechanical motion of a lifelong smoker. "Looks as if I might have found myself a job," Rachel said. She inhaled, closing her eyes and keeping them closed on the exhalation as she announced through the gray haze that, "Lenny Scoffone says there's a receptionist position open in his office and I'm just the gal to fill it."

"When exactly did County Prosecutor Leonard Scoffone become Lenny," I wondered aloud.

Leonard Scoffone, a plodding private practice attorney from the Seattle area, moved to Wind River to open a practice catering to the legal needs of the agricultural community base. Within a year he ran for the county prosecutor seat against a septuagenarian incumbent who died the week before the election. Though clearly out of the race, the incumbent managed to garner over thirty percent

of the vote—a posthumous award of sweet confidence. Since being elected, Leonard had gone unchallenged, save for an ineffectual campaign by an upstart Gonzaga Law School graduate from a town scarcely on the Wind River side of the county line. Never one to invest energy or emotion beyond mandatory minimum, Leonard reveled in his prosecutorial duties in Wind River County ranging from cattle and car rustling to simple assaults and robbery. To Leonard Scoffone's great relief and braggadocio, crime in the county was paltry.

Mrs. Leonard Scoffone—Thelma Scoffone—was seldom seen; she kept to her home for the most part. A victim of the polio epidemic of the 1950s, her every step was a struggle as she dragged a withered leg, buttressed by a full-length brace of stainless steel uprights and leather covered steel bands. When the burden of the brace became too much for her frail body to endure, she was confined to a wheelchair. I always held that Leonard Scoffone survived politically on the county's collective pity for Thelma. Winona and I made bi-monthly visits to the Scoffone home to chat with Thelma. She was a beautifully brilliant woman and a frustrated worker in words. Early on in our friendship she confided

her youthful dreams of becoming another Dorothy Parker or Agatha Christie, even having published several short stories in what she called female fancy magazines. But marriage, a child, and attenuating polio dispatched her dream as swiftly as ink dries on paper.

"You can type?" Bridey couldn't contain her incredulity.

"I use the peck and hunt method," Rachel said.

"Don't you mean hunt and peck?" I suggested from my perch. "Hunt and peck typing would be like gutting a fish before you land it."

Rachel ignored my dig. "Lenny says the job requires more telephone work than typing anyway."

"Congratulations," Bridey said through a measurably forced smile. She continued up the stairs toward the second floor guestrooms.

Rachel snuffed her cigarette, stood and smoothed her mini skirt down along her trim thighs, the same mini skirt she wore her first day in Wind River three weeks earlier. "I only need clean towels," she called up to Bridey as she picked up her purse and moved toward the front doors. "Leave them at the door and don't bother with cleaning my

room." With that, Rachel was out onto the sleepy morning sidewalks of Wind River, destination unknown.

I slid off my stool to follow Bridey up the stairs. I would often help her with small cleaning tasks as I waited for Wallace. "That woman strokes my fur against the grain," I announced.

Bridey flashed a half-smile and continued down the second floor hallway. "Oh, she's all right, Rufus. She's just different from us."

"Your intrepid uncle is late this morning, little sister," I said.

"He took off on his bicycle early this morning," Bridey said, then paused and turned her head to look at me over her shoulder. "He should have been back by now."

"Where was he going?"

"Headed out the lake road again."

I checked my watch. "We'll give him an hour before I rev up Winona."

Other than Rachel, the hotel had four guests: three salesmen—one fertilizer, one aluminum, and one door-to-door health remedies and household items—and Orpha Rose Joiner, who was more of a semi-permanent resident.

Orpha actually lived in an above-the-shop apartment with her daughter Ida Joiner, owner of the only beauty parlor in Wind River. But the two fought bitterly four days out of seven, causing Orpha to make her middle of the night two-block trek to the hotel in curlers, pink chenille robe, and terry-scuff slippers. Upon the inevitable suspension of hostilities, Orpha would flip-flop back down the street to establish herself once again in her daughter's apartment. For the benefit of all concerned, Cal allowed Orpha to keep a room at the hotel at, I'm supposing, an extremely moderate cost. The mother-daughter seesaw game had been going on since Bridey was a small child.

Though it didn't feed the hotel coffer particularly well, Bridey liked having only a handful of guests. She could clean the rooms and do the laundry in just short of three hours. That left one hour for lobby dusting and general cleaning, most of which Wallace, a victim of nocturnal awakenings that prevented him from returning to sleep once he awakened, accomplished at two o'clock in the morning.

"Housekeeping," Bridey said tapping gently on Orpha Rose's door.

"Just a minute, dear," Orpha Rose called from beyond the closed door. Bridey leaned against the doorjamb knowing Orpha Rose could take as much as two minutes to gather herself up, slip in her dentures, pull her robe together, and apply her cherry-candy lipstick to her thin lady-lips.

The hall smelled of Wallace's wooden floor soap, a concoction of linseed oil, lemon juice, and an herbal tea; it delivered a rich, nutty odor that offered a curious, though fleeting comfort. The door to Room 217 opened slowly allowing the fragrance of rose tintured toilet water to waft from the room. "Good morning, dear. And Rufus, what a delightful morning surprise," Orpha Rose said, her weak voice crackling from seventy-five years of use.

"Morning," Bridey said. "Clean towels."

Orpha Rose accepted the towels after patting at her short tightly-permed silvery hair. "I must look a fright," Orpha said.

"You are the morning glory to these tired eyes," I said. "How are you, Orpha Rose?"

"If I had thirty minutes of sleep all night, I'd be surprised. I suffered through all sorts of noise from room 215 last night."

"What sort of noise?" I asked.

"Arguing. A man and a woman arguing."

"Was it Miss Wall?"

"It is her room, you know," Orpha Rose whispered.

"I'll tell my dad. Would you like to move to one of the rooms on the third floor? They all have their own air-conditioner and it's quiet up there." Orpha Rose would never change rooms, but it was so like our thoughtful Bridey to offer the accommodation.

"Well, if Miss Wall is going to be here for any length of time, perhaps she could move to the third floor," Orpha suggested.

The Kilcannons had their rooms on the third floor, Callahan on the southern end in Virgil Virginia's old suite, and Wallace and Bridey in their rooms on the northern end. Rarely was the hotel so near capacity that the third floor rooms were required for hotel guests.

Bridey and I knew if we waited long enough Orpha Rose would let us know what the argument was about. She motioned Bridey closer. "I can't be sure, but I think they were arguing about," she leaned closer still. "Sex," she whispered.

"What precisely did you hear?" I asked, leaning in toward Orpha Rose.

"Well, I couldn't really make out specific words. It was just the way they talked to one another. You know, heated and passionate."

"Did you recognize the man's voice?" Bridey said.

"He sounded a little bit like Clark Gable and a little bit like Farley Granger."

"So nobody from around here then," I concluded.

###

Wallace sat in Winona's sidecar when I slid open one of the double doors to my office that same July morning. His Higgins Color Flow bicycle rested against the fireman's pole. Though I had two reasonably comfortable captain's chairs in the office for visitors, Wallace preferred to sit in the sidecar. He stared at the plaque above my desk and read aloud, *"When we remember we are all mad, the mysteries of life disappear and life stands explained. Mark Twain, Notebook, 1898."* Wallace slowly turned his head in my direction, his handsome face complacent. "Life stands explained, Rufus," he said.

"Ah, were it only true, my friend." I sauntered to my cluttered desk, a disorderly accumulation of papers, bottles of glue, tape dispensers, an assortment of pencils and pens, a desk phone so caked with dirt and ink that the numbers below the rotary dial were completely obscured, and as desk centerpiece, a battle-weary 1940 Royal Arrow typewriter. An emerald-shaded light suspended from the ceiling hung over the desk. The temperamental ceiling fan, left over from the bakery days, was still in the throes of its agonizing start. Wallace looked to the fan and stared long enough to consider several options for the stalwart mechanism. "Delight could fix that fan of yours," he said.

"She could for sure," I said. "I missed you this morning, Wallace. Where'd you go, buddy?" From the saddlebag on the back of Winona, he fished out the leather flying cap and goggles I wore when I had Winona on the open road; he put them on. "You look like a Clyde Pangborn in his barnstorming biplane," I added.

I opened a desk drawer and withdrew my green eye shade—more prop than requisite—and positioned it on my head. I arranged and rearranged the desktop trappings, cleared my phlegmy throat, inserted paper into the roller

of my Royal Arrow, primed to start an article. I waited for Wallace's predictably slow-to-surface answer.

"Well, thank you, Rufus. Lake Lucero. The water and wind are perfect for the annual timed crossing."

My stubby fingers played the Royal Arrow's keys.
Click. Click. Click.

"Do you ever wonder about life on Mars, Rufus?" he asked.

"It takes all I've got to wonder about life right here in Wind River, my friend," I answered.

###

Being a notorious teetotaler, Virgil Virginia's plan to build a bar in the hotel must have surely been a happy surprise for the township. But then, our town founder clearly never allowed personal conviction to stand in the way of making money. Though locked up during the prohibitive years from 1920 to 1933, the bar had been opened for the majority of the hotel's life. The eight-foot oak bar, stripped and stained a honey pine by the Kilcannons, provided sufficient arm and elbow room since rarely did more than a handful of people belly up at any one time. Four bar stools stood at the ready, and thanks to

Wallace the right-most stool had a similarly stained twelve-inch block at its base as a boost for me.

Cal stood behind the bar in the hotel's saloon. Bridey, Wallace, and I were lined up opposite Cal like infielders Tinkers, Evers, and Chance ready to make a double play. The original back bar mirror, tilted slightly toward the room and gravely in need of resilvering, reflected a distorted image of three hopeful faces and the crown of Cal's head. We had posited our request that Bridey and Wallace get the afternoon off to go to the lake for Wallace's annual timed crossing.

"You should have friends your own age," Cal said.

Bridey's face flushed scarlet. "Why?"

"Shared interests, common concerns."

"I'm interested in Uncle Wallace beating last year's time. I don't worry too much about the things other kids do," Bridey said.

"Have you made your decision about which college you'll attend?" Cal asked.

Bridey and I both fixed our gaze at Wallace's reflection in the back bar mirror. Her leaving for college was a subject that elicited a palpably doleful response in

Wallace. This time, however, there was no reaction. Perhaps his scattershot thoughts had delivered him somewhere else at that moment, perhaps to the waters of Lake Lucero.

"Soon," she whispered.

"You two finished with your work?" Cal said.

"Yes," Bridey answered. Wallace nodded.

Cal turned his attention to me. "Don't you have a paper to get out?" He leaned against the back bar with his arms folded across his chest, every bit the manager of the ragtag team standing before him. His demeanor toward me was always reticent, more so than with anyone else. He spoke to me as if he and I were at a great physical distance from one another—opposite corners of the room.

"There will always be news," I said.

Having a definite prescience relative to his brother's decisions and behaviors, Wallace exited the bar saying, "I'll pack our lunch and get my swimming trunks."

"I'm not sure what Wallace will do when you leave for college," Cal said to Bridey. "He'll be lost without you."

"I haven't even decided I'm going to college. And besides, I can take him with me," she said, smiling.

"Then I'd be lost without him," Cal said.

It was one of the rare moments of surprise with Cal. His long-standing laconic and distant attitude toward Bridey defined the relationship as two parallel lines that, if extended to infinity in both directions, would never intersect. Wallace was the third line, the transversal. His devotion to Cal and Bridey existed at immutable equal angles.

"Orpha Rose said Rachel was arguing with a man in her room last night. It kept her awake."

As was his practice when talking with anyone, Cal slightly narrowed his gaze to study Bridey for a change in facial expression, an odd gesture, a voice change that might reveal intent, particularly deceit. People believed because his hearing was limited to his right ear—that damn exploding coral reef—Cal relied on a rudimentary form of lip reading to determine meaning. "I'll look into it," he said.

###

The mistake was telling Ardis Dardanell exactly where we were going. Wallace, Bridey, and I loaded flaccid inner tubes, towels, and a green Coleman cooler laden with sandwiches and beverages in the trunk of Cal's white Chevy

Chevelle at the back of the hotel when Ardis abruptly appeared. Since Rachel's arrival and appearance at her client dinner, Ardis was even more present at the hotel than usual. Since we were going to Lake Lucero, and Ardis was expected at the farm of Cledamae Howell, aka Joaquin Murrieta, to manage her quarterly business reports, Ardis reasoned it only made sense that she ride along. Bridey couldn't think fast enough to confute the accountant's logic since we had to drive past Cledamae's farm to get to the lake. Ardis directed Bridey to pick her up at her office in ten minutes and with that disappeared behind the corner of the hotel.

"We should have told her we were going to the river instead of the lake," Bridey said.

"But we aren't," Wallace said as he adjusted the cooler in the trunk of the car so it would rest precisely in the middle.

"I should have lied all the same," Bridey said.

"That's never a good idea, little sister, unless you are well schooled and practiced in the art," I advised.

"That is a foul venture best left to the true fabulist."

"I think Ardis is jealous of Rachel Wall," Wallace announced.

Bridey stared at Wallace, her forehead furrowed in uncertainty, her eyes wide. "Dad and Rachel—they're not—"

"Oh, no I don't think so. Wouldn't think so. Don't know for sure though," Wallace said. Satisfied with the cooler's placement, he eased the trunk closed. "Rachel Wall. Rachel Wall." Wallace's words trailed off as if mining his memory. "I don't think we knew a Rachel Wall," he announced.

Ignoring the disjointed thoughts Wallace spoke, Bridey said, "She is pretty."

"Ardis was quite lovely at one time. But then we were all quite lovely at one time, weren't we, Rufus?" Wallace said as we climbed in the car. Bridey sat behind the wheel with Wallace in the passenger seat. I took my customary seat between them.

Bridey eased the Chevy up to the curb in front of the Dardanell Accounting office. Ardis dumped herself squarely in the middle of the backseat, offering Bridey an unavoidable rearview mirror image of our passenger. Trailing Ardis was the most cloying sweet perfume ever to

invade my senses. Bridey rolled her window down, easing her head closer to the fresh air, while Wallace held his head nearly outside the open window to catch the cool late morning breeze. And I, sandwiched between, caught only a rare rush of freshness.

Bridey slowed the Chevy as we approached Rachel on her morning wanderings south on Main Street. Ardis offered a halfhearted wave out the back window as we passed her.

"What in the world is that woman up to?" Ardis said.

"Who's that?" Bridey asked with a diluted smile.

"Rachel Wall has yet to pay her bill and it's coming up on four weeks," Ardis said. I watched in the rearview mirror as Ardis rotated her head for a better back-end view of Rachel. "Ordinarily, guests who stay at the Caulfield are required to pay. The last I heard it wasn't a charity, unless of course you want to count Orpha Joiner. Isn't that right, Wallace?"

He pulled away from the window, turning his head a fraction to offer Ardis his profile. "Ordinarily, yes. But, we do have guests who don't pay, who don't have the means to pay." Bridey shot Wallace a cease and desist order with a slight tremor of her head and narrowing of her eyes.

Wallace must have caught the warning since he faced straight ahead once again and pressed his lips together.

Ardis continued her backseat rant. "The woman is up to no good. A person doesn't just turn up in a town like Wind River without a purpose in mind. Says she's from Laramie, Wyoming. She's like no one I've known from Laramie."

"How many people from Laramie do you know?" I had to ask.

"Enough to know she's not. I just have my doubts."

Rachel Wall was a puzzle begging to be unriddled. Regardless of Ardis Dardanell's declaration, I would have nonetheless been compelled to discover the striking woman's true purpose. With that in mind, was it any wonder that I would insinuate myself into Rachel's life in Wind River? Scarcely the hardboiled and hard-drinking—but at heart deeply philosophical and reflective—character detectives such as Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, I relied much more on simple observation to ascertain information of interest. I will acknowledge my speculative nature and a proclivity to make myself the hero in any drama that surrounds me; therefore, it should come as no surprise that I spied on people.

The first opportunity to step into my investigation of Rachel Wall was astonishingly serendipitous. It was the late night before Wallace's timed swim and Ardis's backseat declaration that only a purposeful person would appear in a town like Wind River. I was making my way home from a late round at the High Desert Saloon with the three brawling Bodine brothers, who on that remarkably warm night were in a compatible mood, when I took a shortcut down the alley between the courthouse and the sheriff's office. I peeked in the sheriff's office front-facing window to see a sleeping Deputy Steve at the dispatch desk. His lanky body reclined on the chair at what surely must have been a most uncomfortable boomerang position with his feet at nearly the same height as his head. His hands were tucked into his armpits, legs crossed at the ankles, heels on the desk. Deputy Steve's mouth was wide open. How I restrained myself from wrapping my knuckles on the window glass to startle the deputy awake and create a memory to cherish, I will never know. I left the sleeping Steve Luehrs to his deputy dreams.

An open first floor window of the courthouse was the only light that illuminated the alley. I knew it to be the

backend of the clerk's office. The Venetian blinds were down, but pivoted slightly in the descending position. The faint sound of a radio broadcasting Sinatra singing *Stardust* emanated from the window. With the simple lift to my tippy toes, I was able to see a partial view of the drama as it unfolded. An ancient oscillating fan rested on top of the desk, its steady back and forth rhythm syncopated with the scrape and grind of a mechanism demanding attention. Its blades, heavy with the grime and dirt of constant summer use, were likely of little value in moving the fusty air of the clerk's back office.

The nightingale tells his fairy tale/Of paradise where roses grew.

I could see neither the man's head nor the woman's, but knew with certainty the woman was Rachel Wall. She stood at arm's length from him as she unbuttoned her blouse. She did it slowly, allowing for the blouse to hang open, teasing a view of the soft flesh of her breasts. The man moved toward her, slipping the blouse from her shoulders and off to the floor. He reached around to loosen her brassiere.

The man cupped Rachel's breast in his hand, kneading it in gentle circular motions. He was well aroused now, pushing hard against her. She pushed against his chest until her fingers barely touched him. She turned her back to him, reaching around to unzip her skirt to splay open slowly, exposing the small of her back. He moved to her, again cupping both her breasts in his hands.

He maneuvered her around to face him, slid her skirt down over her hips and unzipped his trousers. Rachel backed up against the wall where he scooped her up and thrust into her. The whimpers and groans of convenient inconvenient sex were layered atop Sinatra's effortless crooning and the fan's laboring gyrations on that sweltering summer night.

I pulled away from the window, noticing a corner of the exterior window frame where a spider's web captured the faint filtered light of the room. It was an orb web, likely constructed that very night beginning with a rectangular frame of silk as the hub, then the radii from the hub, and finally the spirals of silky threads from radii to radii. The spinner herself was ensconced in the middle of the orb waiting for prey to be trapped and then alert her along the radii with vibrations of protest.

Chapter Six

A memory bubbles up like muddy soup when I recall my first experience with a person claiming the ability to communicate with discarnate entities. It was Grand Mae's idea to meet with Madame Brodivaski on the cusp of my twelfth birthday. What Grand Mae's intention was, I'm not certain. Perhaps she simply wanted to connect with her loved ones who had *shuffled off this mortal coil*. Our chauffer dropped Grand Mae, Pip, and me curbside at The Hotel Chelsea on West 23rd Street in New York shortly after a fine birthday dinner at Delmonico's that included memorable Lobster Newburg and Baked Alaska. Grand Mae told neither Pip nor me what we had in store.

Madame Brodivaski was a round, fiftyish lady with an Eastern European accent that suggested Russian or Belarusian. She had a pleasant, peaty odor about her—an earthy essence new to me. In Madame's darkened hotel room, the four of us sat at a table with our hands flat against its topside. A single white taper candle flamed in its center. Aunt Pip was quite tentative to be sure, and I was at a complete loss having never participated in a séance.

Almost immediately Madame Brodivaski went into a trance with her eyes closed, her head titled back, and cavernous nostrils flaring. Little blobs of sweat popped out on her brow and hairy upper lip. Someone is coming across Madame announced—somehow the accent had slipped away. Someone named Cecil is here for Beatrice, Madame said. You need to let go, Madame continued. Move on. Move on.

Well, with that Pip stood up in a powerful, abrupt scoot that sent her chair toppling backwards. She grabbed her coat and exited the hotel room with all possible haste.

To my knowledge Pip was in love only once in her life. I was still in knee breeches when Grand Mae told me the story of Pip's young man while she and I were sailing alone in Manhasset Bay, New York—prompted by my question as to Pip's personal life. He was a young diaper factory worker who shipped off to France with General "Black Jack" Pershing to defend the allies against Germany the first time. It was in the Second Battle of the Marne in the summer of 1918, that Pip's young man succumbed to gaseous gangrene from an abdominal wound. That was all I knew of the story. Not to speak of the dead was apparently a family motto since Grand Mae had taken a solemn oath never to

mention his name, and since it wasn't mentioned I didn't know it until that fateful night with Madame Brodivaski. Grand Mae referred to the young man as Darling and referenced Pip's life as pre-Darling and post-Darling, as if her existence were a measure not unlike the linearly progressive timeline of archeology marked by major earth changes. It didn't take any mental excavation on my part to realize Pip's Darling was Cecil.

After Pip's departure Madame Brodivaski appeared still to be in her trance state. I couldn't help but fan my hand in front of her face. Her eyes fluttered just enough for me to surmise that she was aware of her surroundings. How the good Madame knew the name Cecil is a mystery. A lucky guess, pre-séance research, inadvertently leaked information, or true ability? Grand Mae laid a ten dollar bill on Madame's table, and she and I left almost as abruptly as Pip. Grand Mae swore on my mother's own grave that she said not a word to Madame even our true identities.

Whether by choice or default, Wallace's parents were the only spirits with whom he communicated; although, according to Wallace, Francis and Mary Kilcannon dispatched

an abundant trove of news from other souls as well as disquieting and blissful insights. On a chilly November 22, 1963, Wallace was up at dawn listening to the radio behind the hotel lobby desk with a dedication no one had before witnessed. When queried, he simply responded with the words President Kennedy. We waved it off as one of his moments, but it was a moment that stretched long into the morning. Not until the jolting news of President Kennedy's assassination charged through the radio waves some hours later did Wallace abandon his listening post.

He wasn't given to share most of the information he obtained from his deceased mother and father. On the tenth anniversary of Grand Mae's death in that Montana pasture, I asked Wallace if he might try to connect with her. Just check to see how she was faring on the other side, I said. No, Rufus, I won't do that, he said. If there were reason for concern, he would ask his folks, but since I was asking out of simple curiosity, it wasn't worth their energy. There's nothing simple about my curiosity, my friend, I told him. Perhaps one day we will ask after your Grand Mae, but not this day, Wallace said. I never asked again.

Two days of vomiting, diarrhea, fever, and belly pain plagued Bridey in the spring of her tenth year. Cal believed it was a touch of the flu and it would pass, but Wallace knew better. Against Cal's wishes, Wallace wrapped our sick little girl snug in a blanket and cradled her on his lap in Winona's sidecar; we made our way to the county hospital where an emergency appendectomy was performed. It could have been Wallace's earthly intuition that Bridey was desperately ill; but, I've always believed Francis and Mary sent the message to save their granddaughter.

###

I rotated the central focusing wheel on my binoculars to bring Wallace into focus. He stood on a twenty-foot basalt outcropping across the lake from Bridey and me at a distance of just over 2,700 feet—over half a mile. Arms perpendicular to his ramrod-straight body, drawing them up to a steeple over his head, he sprang forward to cut the passage from air into the inky-blue water of Lake Lucero. It was a perfectly executed dive. I lost sight of him for a beat in mid-air as he came between our line of sight and the glare of the late afternoon sun. We held our collective breath until Wallace's head broke through the water. He

swam toward us from the opposite shore, swimming with strong consistent strokes overhead as even flutter kicks created a small rooster tail of sun-inspired diamonds.

Bridey and I waited on the grassy shore of the lake with our sandwiches and drinks spread out on one of the hotel's red and white checked cloths. She was clocking the swim with Wallace's stopwatch, something she'd been doing since she could cradle the device in her hand. She'd push down the crown to start his time at my signal when I saw his first stroke break water, the seconds tick-ticking along in time with the repeated movements of his arms, and down again to stop when he stood on our shore. Miraculously, his time kept improving as he grew older.

"Hey." A male voice startled both of us.

Beautifully bare-chested in cutoff jeans, with a towel rolled beneath his muscular arm, Harvey Scoffone, the only child of Leonard and Thelma, stood behind us. A bikinied girl, tanned, toned, and ivory blonde, stood at his side.

Bridey had been infatuated with the handsome Harvey Scoffone since the second grade when he arrived in Wind River and managed to accelerate the heartbeat of any girl capable of fogging a mirror. I think I'm in love with

Harvey Scoffone, Bridey told me in the winter of her fifth grade year. Being no stranger to nature's cruelest irony, I asked, how does he make you feel, little sister? It's not so much that I feel anything; it's that I can't stop thinking about him, she said. What do you think about when you think about him, I could only ask. I think about not thinking about him, she said, which further fuddled the issue. I assured her she was only besotted with the lad. Not in love with him then, she surmised. I told her my sweet Grand Mae, who knew everything there was to know about love, said we only love those things which we know we are bound to lose. So, unless you fear losing Harvey Scoffone, you're not in love. That's a good thing, Bridey announced.

We looked back to the lake in time to see Wallace pulling through the water to within twenty yards of our shore. Bridey pushed down on the crown to stop time just as he withdrew himself from the lake. Wallace moved toward us, shaking the excess water from his hair then smoothing it back away from his face. "How'd we do?" he asked barely breathless.

"Two seconds faster than last year," Bridey announced.

"That's a good thing," Wallace said. He looked at Harvey and the girl as if he just realized they were present. Like a child who expects punishment for a recurring transgression, Wallace sat on the corner of the picnic cloth with his back to them, pulling his knees up under his chin and embracing long legs with his arms. Bridey threw a towel over his shoulders.

"How you doing, Wallace?" Harvey said.

Wallace stared across the lake to the basalt outcropping, continuing to do so as he responded to Harvey. "I'm doing well. Thank you."

"He swam all the way across the lake?" the bronzed bikini girl said.

Bridey shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked at the girl and said, "Actually, he swam over and back."

"I could do that," the girl giggled.

"I'm sure you could," I lied, scanning the girl's body and surmising she used up all her muscle and energy reserve to make the short walk from Harvey's car to the lakeshore.

"Who's your friend, Harvey?" I added.

"This here's Susanne Peterson from over by Sparta. This here's Bridey and Wallace Kilcannon and Rufus Dandee,"

Harvey said. "You remember Susanne, Bridey. She went with me to the senior prom." Bridey offered the girl a faint wave and weary smile of recognition.

After a moment's silence, Harvey led Susanne toward a coppice of alder, and nearly the only measure of shade along the shoreline. Susanne's childish high-pitched giggle at something Harvey whispered in her ear echoed eerily in the quiet calm of the lakeside setting as they spread out their towels.

Bridey handed Wallace a sandwich, with a quick glance back toward the alders. "How is it that you get stronger and faster each year?" she asked.

Wallace said, "Maybe they have something to do with it." He nodded in the direction of the outcropping across the lake. "Mother and Dad. They're over there watching us. They're waving now." He put down his plate and returned the wave with great enthusiasm. Neither Bridey nor I had yet to see Francis and Mary when they called on their son. Nonetheless, we both waved with equal gusto.

From the shade of the trees, Susanne tittered again, more muffled this time. She was flat on her back. Harvey

was on his side, resting his head on his hand from his angled elbow.

"You can't see them now, but you will someday," Wallace told Bridey quietly as he continued to look in the direction of the outcropping. "I do wish they had something else to wear over there. Mother wears the same dress she wore to the grange meeting that night, the pink one with little roses all over it. I think it was probably her favorite; although, as I recall she only had two dresses."

"Tell me what Francis is wearing so I'll be sure to recognize him," Bridey said.

"His white shirt but never his Sunday necktie for grange meetings." Wallace smiled and looked toward Bridey. "I gave him that necktie the Christmas before," he paused, looked back across the lake and continued. "His tan slacks, of course. And don't forget to look for his felt fedora—brown. He liked that hat a lot."

"Felt fedora," Bridey said nodding.

"That girl with Harvey will be in trouble soon. We're supposed to stay," Wallace said abruptly before guiding his sandwich to his mouth.

Two other young couples joined Harvey and Susanne as the afternoon dragged on. Bridey recognized the nameless boys from a town fifty miles north of Wind River, streamlined youths who no doubt competed and lettered in every sport known to small town boys. The girls she didn't know. Their agenda for the long summer afternoon appeared to be as much drinking and necking as possible, with only occasional forays into the water. Our several attempts to cajole Wallace into abandoning the vigil didn't work. We would stay.

Susanne's splashing was faint at first. Her singular vain cry for help couldn't pierce the languid afternoon as her companions, sloppy from an excess of alcohol and sun, slept on the shore, boys and girls soaking up the last of their youthful lives, oblivious to the girl slipping away in the middle of Lake Lucero. She disappeared beneath the water just as Wallace was within arm's length of her.

###

"Let's go over the particulars so I can flesh out the beauty of the prose on my faithful Royal," I said. Wallace and I settled in the white Adirondack chairs on the hotel's

front veranda just short of midnight on the day Susanne Petersen did not drown.

Because of the angled back of the wooden-slatted chair, my legs jutted straight out like a small child's. We savored Punch Corona Gordas cigars from my sacred Spanish cedar humidor, brought out to mark occasions I deemed significant. We stared down the hauntingly tranquil Main Street, illuminated more by faint moonlight than the dozen glass-globe street lamps. "*Local Man Saves Girl* is my lead headline for the weekend edition. Come on, Wallace, you'll be the town hero." I placed the luscious corona between my lips, putting pen to note pad in anticipation.

"I'm no hero. And you were there, Rufus." The corner of Wallace's mouth turned up a bit as he said, "Bridey did CPR on the girl. She's the one who saved her life. Talk to Bridey. Or talk to Doc Nichols."

"Indeed, the incident is replete with helpful souls. But, you, my friend, are the one who reached into the depths of Lake Lucero to pluck the fair maiden from the threshold of the murky weed-infested netherworld," I said. "Where was she—ten or fifteen feet down?"

Holding the corona between his index and middle finger, Wallace inhaled, withdrew the cigar and pursed his lips, sending a perfectly formed silvery smoke ring fit for the finger of a princess on a spiral path skyward. He followed the journey of the smoke until it dissipated entirely, and he blew another as perfect as the first. "We should develop a system of smoke signals to communicate with one another," he announced.

"Why in the world would we do that?"

"Imagine if you had broken your leg and you were lost on top of a mountain. You are alone without food or drink. You could start a small fire with wet leaves to create the smoke. We'd have to establish a cipher system, of course." Wallace paused, then said, "But I wouldn't need a smoke signal to know you were in trouble."

I sighed heavily. "Your mind goes to such delightfully obscure places, my dear. Now, back to the issue at hand."

"Talk to Bridey," Wallace repeated.

"Well, the thing is, she doesn't want to be identified in the story. I think she might be a bit embarrassed." I let my pen and note pad slip from my lap to the veranda floor, settling back more comfortably into the chair,

focusing on the corona. "I mean, here's this stunningly sexy girl out with the fellow whose held the waking and dreaming thoughts of our Bridey since childhood and she has to give the little floozy mouth-to-mouth."

Wallace said, "Oh, I don't think--," he paused, clearly trying to remember the girl's name, "the girl's a floozy."

I said, "Susanne Petersen didn't know how to swim. What was she thinking? Wait a minute, she wasn't thinking-- she was drunk."

"Perhaps she was showing off for Harvey and before she knew it, she had gone too far," he offered. "Drowning people can't really scream, you know," Wallace said, his voice trailing off into the palpable sadness.

"Actually, I hadn't thought about it. I've never imagined nor hoped for a situation in which I might be called upon to save anyone in or out of water," I said.

"We waited a long time for it to happen, didn't we? Bridey was getting sunburned."

"Francis and Mary told you this girl would drown?" I said.

Wallace nodded as he studied the ash end of the corona then replaced it between his lips. "That she might drown. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't include that in your story," he said. "The part about Mother and Dad. They aren't keen on publicity."

"With all due respect to your sainted parents, were I to include them in the story, my credibility as a journalist would sink lower and faster than Susanne Petersen in the muck of Lake Lucero," I said.

"That's not funny," he said.

"Base and tasteless. I retract the previous rambling. Please accept my humble apology."

"I've never thought of you as humble." Wallace paused, then added, "I suppose that's why you're such a good journalist."

"I find the terms good and journalist in association with me somewhat hyperbolic, but thank you." We took simultaneous pulls on our cigars, tilted our heads back against our Adirondacks and blew smoke like twin volcanoes letting steam.

"Have you ever been to Cuba?" Wallace said.

I removed the cigar from my mouth and stared at Wallace in wonderment. "I can't believe I've never told you about Mariana Betancourt."

"Don't believe you have," he said.

"Havana before Castro," I started. "I was a *habitué* of the Buena Vista Social Club, haven for the sweetest music in the northern hemisphere and Mariana Betancourt, the most enticing hostess to ever lead a man astray. And to my eternal delight, my dear Wallace, Senorita Betancourt had a penchant for short men."

###

Dramatic Rescue Saves Wind River County Girl from Certain

Death

Saturday, July 24, 1965

Lake Lucero, Wind River County Washington

Summer tragedy was averted late Friday afternoon when Wallace and Bridey Kilcannon combined efforts to save a girl, 17, from drowning. The girl, a resident of southern Wind River County, was swimming with a group of friends when she found herself overcome by fatigue in the middle of Lake Lucero.

Kilcannon, his niece Bridey, and this reporter were enjoying a leisurely afternoon on the lakeshore when Kilcannon recognized the girl was in extreme distress in the middle of the lake. With no regard for his personal safety, he swam to the aid of the girl, who had sunk some fifteen feet into the murky depths.

He brought her to the surface and eventually to the lakeshore where Bridey took over the rescue effort. As the girl's friends stood watching, Bridey, a former lifeguard at the Community Pool and 1964 valedictorian of Wind River High, performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the victim until she was able to breathe of her own accord.

The Kilcannons transported the girl to the medical office of Dr. Frazier Nichols for a thorough checkup. Dr. Nichols reported, "This girl owes her life to the Kilcannons." The girl is resting comfortably at home.

Upon investigation of the accident, Sheriff Alabaster Blue concluded there was nothing untoward about the incident. The young lady made a mistake in judgment and owes her life to the Kilcannons.

###

The day the dramatic rescue news story appeared in the *Tribune*, Bridey sat at my desk, eyes straight ahead, and hands in lap rapidly twiddling thumbs, a sign that she was weighing her words. I slid down the pole with coffee cup in hand, buoyant from a most agreeable dream nourished by the presence of Mariana Betancourt. "When will I ever learn that by locking the front doors of this office, intruders are inevitably discouraged from entering?" Bridey remained in my chair as I stood sipping my tepid coffee, trying to relegate the image of a naked Mariana to the deeper recesses of my imagination.

"Rufus, I didn't want my name used in your article." Her tone was unusually petulant.

"You and Wallace are true heroes. You need recognition."

"The details about why that girl nearly drowned are completely missing," she said, thumbs still a' twiddle.

"There are certain restraints imposed upon a newspaper regarding salient facts. The girl is underage, those kids were all drinking, not to mention the departed Francis and Mary Kilcannon as catalysts," I said.

"I would like a retraction," Bridey said in near-whisper. "Please," she added.

"I don't print retractions."

"Every newspaper prints retractions."

"Well, I guess that's what sets the *Wind River Tribune* apart from all other papers in the universe of news. And if I were the kind of weak-kneed editor who buckled to every retraction request, which I am not and will not, what would I retract? Your cat is out of the gunny bag, little sister. And I guarantee that there isn't a person in this county who didn't hear that you and Wallace were the rescuers. They'll probably erect a statue of the two of you in the town square."

"We don't have a town square."

"Perhaps we'll build one to accommodate your statue," I suggested.

I stood on tiptoe to pull the string on the ceiling-suspended lamp above the desk, flooding the area with a near-blinding white light, and placed my hand on her shoulder. "Rest assured, Bridey, the stupidity of a girl incapable of staying sober or tumbling to the fact people unable to tread water rarely have success as long distance

swimmers must be renowned. I can guarantee you the truth of what happened is already out there."

"I give up," Bridey announced, relinquishing my chair and sinking into the mottled captain's chair in the corner of the office.

"I thought we taught you not to give up until the situation deteriorated to the realm of hopeless," I said.

"I'm not sure about the situation, but I think you're hopeless." That sweet Bridey smile spread slowly as she shook her head.

"Now that's the spirit," I said. "How is Wallace this morning?"

"So far so good."

"We shall remain ever vigilant," I said.

Bridey stood to leave, absently brushing her bottom as if ages-old paint could stain, when Sheriff Alabaster Blue strolled through the open door of the *Tribune* office. The nature of bad news was etched on his face with downcast eyes and drawn lips. He wore black slacks and a white open-collared shirt with sleeves rolled up past his elbows. He was perhaps the only man I've known who looked better in civvies than in an outfit unique to any member group. Since

being anointed sheriff, more often than not, he would forsake his standard issue uniform for civilian clothes, his badge clipped to his belt. And unlike Deputy Steve, Al rarely wore his pistol.

Bridey sat back down, aiming her gaze in my general direction. "Morning Rufus," Al paused and looked toward Bridey. "How you doin', Bridey?"

Bridey Kilcannon and Alabaster Blue-moonflowers waiting for the fall of night.

"I'm well," she said.

"That's quite a thing you and Wallace did for that girl," he said.

"I guess my training just kicked in," she said with great diffidence.

"What brings you out on this fine Sunday afternoon, Sheriff? Other than the pure delight of the company here gathered. Oh, in the off chance you're here to complain about a story in the *Tribune*, I shall take this opportunity to remind you that I do not print retractions."

"I got a call from the Flathead County Sheriff this morning," Al said. "They found Earl Hamby's body floating down the river."

Bridey and I gasped in unison. Her open hand went right to mouth, in that gesture that suggests if the words aren't spoken, it isn't real. And for some unfathomable reason I went straight to my filing cabinet, pulled out the file on Sheriff Earl Hamby, and laid it unopened on my desk. I had known Earl for fifteen years—as long as I had been in Wind River. When we first met he had been Sheriff of Wind River County since 1935, at a time when small town law enforcement still had something of an echo of the Earp Brothers. Earl was a man with an abiding sense of justice and a steadfast devotion to his community, who also knew when to look the other way. In his final year as sheriff he confided in me that his wish was to just float away down a river with his waders full of water and his fly pole in his hand.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I managed finally. "I'll get started on the obit this morning."

"I'd appreciate that, Rufus. I'll fill you in on the details as I learn them. They'll be shipping his body back by train once the autopsy--." Al stopped and swallowed hard. It was clear from his softly spoken words and the way

he stared at the file on my desk that his elastic heart had reached its limit.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Bridey asked as she turned toward Al. I sensed she wanted to comfort him somehow, but stopped short. Indeed, I felt the same urge. Al and Earl shared a great fondness and respect for one another.

"Can I get back to you when I know more about what Earl wanted?"

"Of course," she said.

I opened the file slowly. It blossomed with a horde of scribbled notes, typed musings, black and white photos, negatives, news clippings, and the last poker hand Earl held at my desk the night before he left for Montana. The Ten, Jack, Queen, King, and Ace of Diamonds. Beat this fucking royal flush, newspaper boy, he said fanning out his winning cards across the desk. Guess there's no need to play with you again, he told me. A whiff of lingering Lucky Strike cigarettes wafted up from the ephemeral collection in front of me like the faintly perceived fragrance of fruit from a freshly baked pie.

"Wallace came to see me late last night, Bridey," Al said.

Bridey's eyes shot to me and back again to Al. "He did?" she said. Bridey and I knew well what was coming.

"He came to tell me Earl had died and was floating down the river. This was hours before I got the call from the Flathead County Sheriff. How'd he know?"

Al left after Bridey and I assured him it wasn't unusual for Wallace's prescient skill to surface now and again. Ordinarily he would inform either Bridey or me of a pending death or disaster; but, for some reason he was compelled to share the information about Earl's float trip down the Flathead River directly with Al.

"Al's a good sheriff, isn't he, Rufus?" Bridey asked. She had moved into Wynona's sidecar by then, a place she favored as much as Wallace. Aside from my desk chair, the sidecar was the most comfortable seat in the office.

"One of the best, little sister."

It was at that less than auspicious moment that Harvey Scoffone, holding a roll of negatives, stepped from the darkroom. It wasn't that I was keeping Harvey a secret. The

simple truth was that I had forgotten he'd been working in the darkroom for several hours.

Harvey held the roll up to catch light behind it as he came toward us. "Take a look at these, Rufus. I think you might like..." He noticed Bridey. "Hi," he said. She smiled and climbed out of the sidecar, her head down.

"Let's see what you have here, Harv," I said. I held the roll up to catch the light and scanned the negatives. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Print every third neg so you can get a feel for developing the print."

"Sure," Harvey said. He stepped back toward the darkroom, smiling, obviously pleased with his efforts and my praise. "Good to see you, Bridey," he said over his shoulder as he disappeared into the darkroom.

Bridey waited for the darkroom's red light to illuminate before she said in just short of a whisper, "What's the story?"

"There's no story here, kiddo. Harvey was looking for a job until he decides what to do with his lucky life; I need an assistant," I took a sip of my cooling coffee. "It seemed like the perfect arrangement."

"Assistant? I sat in English class with him for years. Harvey Scoffone couldn't conjugate a verb if his life depended on it—if your life depended on it," she said.

"Fortunately, most photogs aren't called upon to conjugate much of anything--in the grammatical sense that is. I'll send him out on simple assignments."

"If you needed an assistant, you could have asked me. I can write and take pictures."

"Unless I've been greatly misinformed, you already have a job—at the hotel. Furthermore, his father asked..."

Bridey raised her hands to prevent further explanation. "I get it now. A couple of old cronies scratching backs," she said.

"A rude simian image, but accurate. Those who serve the public drink from the same trough, you know." I saluted Bridey with my coffee mug before I finished its contents, which had gone cold. "Dagnamit, is there anything worse than cold coffee in the morning?"

Bridey stared hard at me.

"Well, obviously some people think there is," I said, returning her stare.

###

We had looked everywhere Wallace had hidden in years past. We figured we had one hour, two at the most, to find his hiding place. A heavy, fast moving thunderstorm was rolling out of the southeast, gathering all sorts of Idaho and Oregon energy en route. Since Wallace didn't drive, the perimeter of the search didn't reach much beyond the city limits of Wind River. I followed Cal up the stairs after completing our search in the hotel basement. Cal stopped abruptly near the top of the stair. Rachel Wall stood at the threshold, arms akimbo.

"No luck?" she said.

"I didn't expect he'd be there. It's been a while since he used the basement," he said, ascending the stairs once again, slower this time. "Excuse me."

Like the many-headed hound Cerberus guarding the gate of Hades, Rachel wasn't going to allow passage up through the basement door. "Excuse me," Cal stressed. Finally she moved aside, a churlish sneer on her face.

"How are you this morning?" I asked in the most pleasant tone I had available. She clearly hadn't seen me coming up behind Cal and apparently didn't think my inquiry necessitated a response.

Cal closed the basement door, locking it behind him. "I haven't seen him for several days actually," Rachel said, following Cal into the hotel lobby.

"I'm just going to slip into the bar to get some orange juice," I said. I fully intended to get juice, but instead found myself flattened against the wall adjacent to the entrance. Grand Mae always said I was blessed with the hearing acuity of an Anatolian Shepherd dog and that people should be careful what they said when I was within earshot. My darling grandmother wasn't fully aware of the extent of my hearing range.

Although Cal and Rachel were alone in the lobby, he barely spoke above a whisper. "I appreciate the fact you're making an effort to keep your distance from Wallace."

"Do I have any choice?" she said.

"You can choose to leave."

"Now, Callahan, you know that's not an option. Why, I'm just settling in here. What with my new job in Lenny's office, and getting to know Bridey, I don't think it would be wise of me to," she paused.

I managed a peek around the corner just as she stepped closer to him and rested her hand flat against his chest, "Just up and leave, do you?"

Cal held his ground, but grabbed her slender wrist and pulled it away. "I never wanted you here in the first place."

She smiled and moved away as she said, "It's strange he doesn't remember any of it."

I flattened again against the wall, wondering what the hell these two people were talking about. Keeping Rachel away from Wallace? What was Wallace not remembering? My curiosity instantly escalated to a fever pitch.

"Wallace is a complex man. To say he has no recollection of what happened would be to second guess him. That's not always wise," Cal said.

I heard the hotel's front door sweep open and felt a wave of heavy, humid late afternoon air push into the lobby. "Any sign of him?" Bridey called out. With her entrance into the scene playing out, I grabbed a small carton of juice from the bar refrigerator and joined the players in the lobby.

"He's not in the hotel, I'm sure of that," Cal said. You checked everywhere he's gone before in town?"

"Twice," Bridey said. "The library, the cafe, the drugstore, everywhere. No one has seen him."

Like a specter at the top of the stairs, Orpha Rose Joiner, in her chenille robe, leaned over the balustrade and called down to the lobby, "Have you found Wallace? Radio says the storm is just a few hours away."

"No, we haven't, Orpha Rose," Cal called up to her.

"He left very early this morning on his bicycle, you know," she said.

We looked from one to another. Cal asked, "Did he say where he was going?"

"To see his mother and dad," Orpha eyes squinted just a bit at Cal as she pulled her robe together at her neck and said, "Your parents have passed on, haven't they Cal?"

###

Days following the thunderstorm Wallace related to me the intimate moments of the event. As he stood on the precipice of the basalt outcropping, he watched the ominous obsidian cloud in the southeast as it devoured innocent blue on its journey toward him. The odor of the converging

storm was overwhelming—the smell of ozone, created in the mysterious molecular dissociation and atomic recombinations in the high voltages of thunderstorms. A harbinger wind frothed the waters of Lake Lucero below him.

He saw the first signature lightning strike, counted the seconds between the strike and the low rumble of the thunder, and calculated the storm at approximately twelve miles from him. He removed his shoes and socks, his shirt and pants, and finally his undershorts. Another thunder rumble—longer, lower, louder. The thunder insinuated its way into his body, moving through like a roiling river current displacing his blood, organs, and bones with waves of throbbing sound. He pushed the sound into the background of his thoughts.

He felt the rain forced against his flesh by the assaulting wind, pressing harder and harder as the minutes passed. The light of late afternoon faded to near black. He bent his head back, closed his eyes, and opened his mouth to receive the sacrament of the storm. The loud short bang of thunder he heard to his left was the sign it was upon him. Now all he need do was wait.

Francis and Mary floated above the lake as easily as the feathery dandelion pappus are carried in the wind. They watched him, talked to him, and beckoned him. They wanted him to join them. He had made a mistake in not going with them the first time. Rebirth Wallace said. Back to the place of beginning. Another deafening thunder boom and another. It was the sound of the explosive revolution of the heated air that burrowed into him this time, not the iniquitous lightning. He felt as if a vortex were issuing from his center, rapidly progressing upward to the top of his head. Excruciating pain hit in an instant as he fell forward.

It was at that moment that Cal grabbed his brother's arm and pulled him back from the ledge. Wallace landed flat, hitting his head hard on the basalt.

I screamed to be heard over the deluge. "Go get a blanket from the car." Cal made his way down the stair-stepped outcroppings toward the Chevy parked at the base of the basalt, its headlights fuzzy lighted blurs in the downpour.

I checked Wallace's breathing and his pulse. "You son-uva-bitch," I said, leaning over and kissing his forehead. "You sorry son-uva-bitch."

Chapter Seven

The driver sitting atop the horse-drawn funeral hearse bearing the coffin of Virgil Virginia Erlewine wears a top hat and high-collared waistcoat. He sits Victorian prim, holding the reins of the two-horse team that will make the slow, somber trek from the Caulfield Hotel to Cottonwood Cemetery in the summer of 1925. The stately black horses, crowned with quivering funeral plumes secured to the top of their bridles, are most certainly Friesians with their signature sleek lower leg hair.

Wind River Reel Number 118 carries on the funeral hearse. Four paneled-glass lanterns are positioned at each of the top corners of the glass-encased coach. The interior of the carriage is of opulent circumstance with elegant white drapes and contrasting black tassels affixed in the pinch of the scallops. The floor of the carriage appears to be covered by an undulant sea of satin. Contrary to what one might expect with such an ostentatious vehicle of transport, the coffin itself is an unadorned pine box. A final staging that so well represents the life of Virgil

Virginia—layers of pretense peeled away to expose the simple truth.

A most remarkable number of mourners fall in behind the hearse once it begins its silent journey. As noted by the scrupulous cameraman's placard at the beginning of the reel Mortician Norbert Beedle, Virgil Virginia's unsuspecting hunting companion, leads the procession. By comparison to the height of the hearse, Norbert looks to be well over six feet tall, powerfully built, and despite a dour countenance, a sincerely handsome man.

Jonathan Faircloth with the hereafter vengeful Ethel Faircloth at his side follows Norbert. Men, women, and children wrapped in dark garb follow in lock-step, some dab with kerchiefs at imperceptible tears; others simply stare straight on. Many of the mourners are recognizable from previous footage, but most are the unknown or unnamed. A dusty rustling wind plays against the processional, swooshing coattails and ankle-brushing hems, forcing all to hold fast to hats.

I wondered if a year later Jonathan Faircloth had a similar sendoff. It is highly doubtful in that no film record of his funeral exists. There is, however, footage of

a fairly jubilant Ethel returning to a hankie waving Wind River welcome-home following her release from the state pen in 1936. Perhaps that speaks to the disparate regard the citizens of Wind River had for the Faircloths.

###

A week following the reemergence of Susanne Peterson from Lake Lucero and just short of three weeks before the death of Rachel Wall, Bridey and I waited in a small room of the First Presbyterian Church of Wind River. It was in truth the second, the first having succumbed to a holy conflagration in 1913, when the much vaunted steam pumper, a victim of some kind of mechanical malfunction, failed to generate enough pressure to save the rustic clapboard edifice of the original First Presbyterian. The replacement was built at the end of Main Street with a head-on view of the Caulfield Hotel two blocks east. Built in New England Georgian style, idyllic with its brilliant white exterior, oversized steeple, and soaring spire the church was an ideal counterbalance to what lay in opposition. The clock at the base of the steeple functioned, except for the fact it had been in arrears by fifteen minutes for as far back as anyone could recall. Not surprisingly, clock-watchers

chose to adjust to the discrepancy rather than see to its costly repair.

I'd never seen Bridey as nervous as she was the afternoon of Earl's funeral service.

"Why should I have to do it?" she whined softly. Bridey and I were in the room on the second floor of the church that served many-uses, most specifically, the bridal preparation room. There was nothing fancy or frilly about the décor, just a wall of mirrors, several small tables, a clothes rack, and a lovely cream-colored cracked vase stuffed with dusty red plastic roses on one of the tables. Bridey was standing at the small head-level window overlooking the church's powdery parking lot as arriving cars and trucks churned up the sacred dirt. "Why didn't Al ask Cledamae? She's in the church choir, too. And her voice is far better than mine." She turned toward me, an entreating look fixed on her sweet face.

"Cledamae is showing signs of some, well, mental fatigue, not to mention a rather disturbing affinity to a long-dead Mexican bandit. You know as well as I that spirit and dedication underpin a church choir, not talent. Need I remind you who else is in the choir?" I bowed my head and

held my arms perpendicular to my body. I stood before her in my much altered black choir robe with its oversized purple pennant stole; I looked more the human Christmas decoration than choir member. Bridey stifled a laugh. "You told Al that you would help out any way you could," I reminded her.

"Making sandwiches, arranging flowers on the altar, handing out programs. I didn't expect he'd ask me to actually, well, perform."

"And you could have refused."

Bridey whispered into the window glass, "I couldn't." Abruptly she turned and shot both hands heavenward to expose half-moons of perspiration in the armpits of her gray shirtwaist dress. "Look at me, Rufus. I'm more nervous now than when I spoke at graduation."

"It's hotter than the sunniest day in hell, little sister. I'll bet your last sawbuck you won't be the only one sweating out there. Relax, breathe deeply, and think how delighted Earl will be when he hears you singing his favorite cowboy anthem."

"If he hadn't had a heart attack and drowned in that river, hearing me sing all seven verses plus the chorus of

Home on the Range would have killed him." There was genuine sadness in her voice.

I escorted her toward the door. "You'll do just fine. And don't raise your arms," I added.

Though I can play a number of instruments from classical guitar to didgeridoo, the use of my voice as an instrument was, at best, a rival for Bridey's mediocrity. Nonetheless, joining the church choir was an absolute. Not only did my choir seat offer a splendid view of the twelve lancet arch stained-glass windows that would turn electric with reds, greens, purples, and blues when light would find them, but where else can one sit in relative comfort to observe friend and foe as they respond to the benedictions and maledictions from the pulpit? To ensure the best possible seat for observation, I always sat in the decani stall, in the seat closest to the nave that offered an unobstructed view of the congregation. By monitoring responses to sermons of sin and virtue, I could fairly well determine the lustful and chaste, diligent and slothful, gluttonous and temperate, and all other human antipodes as congregants were sermonized. I was a journalism god sitting atop Mount Olympus.

The church was near-full when Cal entered for Earl's funeral. As was his practice, Wallace hung back at the church entrance acknowledging folks with nods and frequent handshakes. He stationed himself next to his favorite stained glass depiction of Christ Healing the Blind Man, occasionally stepping in front of it for a moment's study, pulling away, and then in front again for another study. He fixated on a space at the crown of the blind man's head where the glass was missing. He'd tell me, Rufus, we need to fix that glass. And I'd tell him, we'd see to it. At the commencement of a funeral service, Wallace would slip out of the church, to reappear for the journey to the cemetery. I suspected for Earl's service he would stay within earshot to hear Bridey sing.

I wasn't surprised at Wallace's response when I asked him why he didn't sit with the congregation during a funeral service. Well, he told me, he'd rather spend a few minutes at the back of the church saying a private good-bye to the deceased. They don't always appear, he said, but once in awhile they like to stop by to check on how it's going.

A better man than I would have offered to sing a duet with Bridey. And a better man did. She began well in the key of close enough, but was tossed off her game when Earl's fly fishing rod and wicker angler's creel, serving as commemoratives on a stool next to the coffin, tumbled to the floor. As I took it upon myself to replace the rod and creel, fragrant with lasting memories of fish and bait, Alabaster Blue stepped up to the sanctuary to sing along with Bridey. Together they faced the packed pews, with nearly every attendee fanning his or her face with a funeral program, hat, hymnal, or handbag—anything to move the torpid First Presbyterian air.

Al caught Bridey's hand for a single moment as he stepped in beside her. His voice, a pleasing tenor with unexpected range, outstripped Bridey's. I expect by then she was simply mouthing the words.

We all joined in the final chorus for our protector, citizen, and friend Earl Hamby with nary a discouraging word in the cloudless skies of Wind River. And according to Wallace, Earl was pleased.

It was during that final chorus that I caught sight of Ardis Dardanell and Rachel Wall sitting at opposite ends of

the second pew. Rachel had managed to slip in next to Cal at the aisle end of the pew, while Ardis was several folks removed from him. The women sang along with the rest of the congregation, but stared at one another like two one-eyed poker players at a showdown in a high stakes game.

The procession to Cottonwood Cemetery for Earl's settling-in was uneventful, except for a middling disturbance by the three Bodine brothers. The brothers, who ranged in age from nineteen to near thirty, earned the title of the Wild Bunch of Wind River. Despite the best efforts of their parents and varying degrees of attention by Earl Hamby, the boys' youth was trademarked by one misdemeanor after another, ranging from public disturbance to vandalism and assault—usually against one another, and seldom discouraged by anyone who knew the boys. Frankie, the youngest, spent most of the first eight years of his life tied to a tree in the family's front yard. It wasn't necessarily a case of abuse; Frankie just had this remarkable wanderlust and fascination with fire which, as bad luck would have it, his brothers Fletch and Jesse shared. The tether worked well until Frankie managed to set

the tree ablaze, inflicting third degree burns to his face and forearms.

The Bodine Brothers decided to pay homage to our late sheriff by setting off fireworks along Cottonwood Road. The ensuing fire in tindery grass was extinguished almost as soon as it started. In the hindmost position of the procession, at a distance so as not to ingest too much dust, I was astride Winona with Wallace in the sidecar. Wallace, of course, knew what lay ahead and motioned me over to the side of the road. He cut quite a figure in his dark funeral suit, dress shoes, leather flying cap, and goggles as he put down the initial flames, sacrificing Winona's cycle blanket to the task. We caught sight of the Bodines' backsides disappearing into the bordering bushes of Caulfield Creek. Wallace and I concluded that since Earl Hamby had seen more of the fleeing Bodine butt ends than their doltish faces over the years, it was a fitting sendoff.

###

No more than twelve inches separated Ardis and Rachel as they faced each other down in front of the kitchen sink following Earl's reception. I had busied myself tidying up

the church and basement reception area, hoping to linger long enough to successfully abscond with some leftover finger sandwiches that would suffice nicely for dinner. I walked in on the women right at the point where their enmity was palpable. Behind them the faucet was running full-bore into the sink full of dishes and lemony froth.

Ardis wore a heavy-duty white apron over her long-sleeved black funeral costume with dainty ecru laced collar and cuffs. I don't recall ever seeing her wear any other dress to a Wind River funeral; although, I highly suspected that since she had added considerable girth over the years, she had either made extreme alterations to the original frock or had managed to purchase a number of the same dress in increasing sizes over the years to create the illusion of constancy. Her head attire varied over the years, but was always tasteful. For Earl's dispatch she wore a rather fetching black pill box number with French netting to her forehead.

Rachel, sans apron, was enticing in a snug mid-thigh length black skirt, sleeveless white blouse, and shockingly high heels. She was hatless.

The women paused in their emerging vitriol, simultaneously turning toward me. It was Rachel who fixed me with a stare as hard as a diamond drill bit and said, "What do you want?"

Recognizing the highly combustive nature of the circumstance, I stepped backwards. "Sorry, ladies. Please, continue," I announced, making eye contact with neither. I backed out, but not away as I slipped around the corner to the short hall leading to the restrooms. The view of the kitchen was imperfect, but the sound was exceptional since one of the women had the foresight to shut off the water.

"What right do you have to be here?" Ardis asked Rachel in the inquisitorial tone I knew well.

"In this kitchen or in Wind River?" Rachel said. Flippant was wasted on Ardis.

"You have no right interfering with our lives."

"I have more right than you can possibly imagine," Rachel said in a voice remarkable in its affected sweetness. "And what do you mean by our lives? I frankly want nothing to do with you."

Ardis's retort was muted by the angry clanging of flatware slammed into drawers and the ringing plinks of furiously stacked porcelainware.

Rachel then spoke words that caused me great concern, for I knew well how close Ardis held Cal to her heart. "You make a fool of yourself with Cal, fawning over him the way you do."

There was a disturbingly long silence where I hung back, visualizing both women arming themselves with butter knives or cake cutters. And for a moment I considered making my presence known so as to forestall the confrontation moving beyond words. It was a fleeting moment, however, as I had an unsettling recall of interfering with Mariana Betancourt and a young woman who accused the lovely Mariana of fucking her boyfriend. The knife wound to my neck was thankfully superficial due to Mariana's ability to wrest the weapon from the jealous woman. As souvenirs Mariana kept the knife, the young woman's left earlobe and its dangling adornment, and I have every reason to believe the boyfriend as well.

Rachel dug deeper. "He's no more interested in you than I am in that no-account newspaper editor who fell off

the circus wagon and landed in this two-bit town." Not surprisingly, Ardis didn't rally to my defense. In fairness to her, the salvo from Rachel would have required every ounce of defense Ardis could muster.

The tapping of approaching high heels on the linoleum floor forced me into the men's restroom. I left the light off and moved toward the back wall to the urinal.

The door crashed open. I couldn't see Rachel's face, but she could surely see mine as she straight-armed the door so illumination from the hallway bathed me and the stained urinal in a dim light.

"Can you only get off by snooping and hiding behind piss bowls? You're pathetic," Rachel said flatly. She held the door open for three beats of my heart, and then pulled it as slowly and gently as a mother closing the creaking bedroom door of her sleeping child.

Neither woman had chosen her enemy well.

###

The day following Earl's funeral and the dustup between Ardis and Rachel, Pip and I were enjoying another New York Egg Cream when Rachel swept into Woodcock's Drug. She passed behind us with the speed of a peregrine falcon

in a tailwind. Pip followed her entrance in the back mirror, and then offered me a sidewise glance and eyebrow arch. I slipped from my stool and made my way toward the pharmacy window. The aisle housing feminine products was hardly appropriate; I moved to the aisle of foot care and laxatives.

"Is my prescription ready?" she asked.

Herbert peered over the rim of his reading glasses.

"What's the name again?"

"Rachel Wall," she said with gnarled impatience. "You said it would be ready yesterday."

"So I did." Herbert set a bottle of medication on the counter. "That'll be five dollars."

Rachel slapped a five dollar bill on the counter, dropped the prescription bottle into her purse, and exited the drugstore as swiftly as she entered.

Herbert asked, "I help you with something there, Rufus?"

"No, just browsing." I nodded in the direction of the door. "Some people just never get up on the friendly side of the bed, do they?"

"That young woman could use more sleep. A good, long walk before bed does more good than any pill," he said.

Chapter Eight

A week following the discovery of Rachel's body at Stump Beach, Pip, Wallace, and I labored over our third game of *Scrabble* for the afternoon. The *Scrabble* board and tiles had usurped the Royal Arrow typewriter during my lunch time coffee, forestalling the final edit of the *Tribune* weekend edition. The fan hanging from the ceiling performed valiantly, though its wobbly, noisy nature was exaggerated under the strain of late afternoon summer heat. Wallace absently tapped his index finger on the desk along with the regular mechanical bump of the fan until Pip gently laid her hand over his and held it still.

I was elated at having just played my high value 'x' tile with the word *xerography* on two triple word squares for a total of 252 points when Al Blue walked through the open office doors. I victoriously waved him toward us.

"I don't know the word *xerography*," Wallace said with unwarranted sorrow.

"That's perfectly understandable," Pip said, flipping her wrist in front of her face with the latest edition of

the *Tribune* she had fashioned into a crude, but effective fan. "Few people would. It's a dry copy technique."

"You know the word," Wallace said.

"I know many things you don't; you know many things I don't. We shall call it an intellectual draw," she said. "And that was a stunning strategic move on your part, nephew."

"Thank you, Pip. Join us for a game, Al."

Al looked over Wallace's shoulder at our *Scrabble* board, angling his head as if studying the words and their tangential connection with one another. He held his gaze on the board as he answered, "Thanks, no. Rufus, I need to talk to you privately."

"Perhaps when we're finished here?" I said.

"Under most circumstances I'd honor your game, but we're a little short on time."

Pip rested her hand on Wallace's shoulder. "It's a little early in the day for me, but would you fancy an ice cream?" she asked. With Wallace in the lead, the two were on their way to Woodcock's Drugstore.

Al sat in the paint-stained captain's chair Pip had so recently vacated. He looked more careworn than usual, with

an exceptional weariness in his eyes, and unfamiliar furrows on his brow. I was tempted to scamper upstairs for a pillow and blanket, but held my ground and, miraculously, my tongue. He sat silently for what wore like a long minute, and then leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and joining his hands at his forehead. He drew up again and locked my eyes, penetrating to my murky depth. "Tell me what you were doing with Rachel Wall the night before she died."

###

The High Desert Saloon had changed little since its opening in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The only changes were additional layers of dust and grime in the corners, deeper depressions on the floor from customers bellied to the bar in the same place night after night after night, the quality of the beer, food, and plumbing, the introduction of a pool table at the far end and a Wurlitzer Bubbler Jukebox near the entrance.

Otherwise, it is the same establishment depicted in Wind River Reel Number 40, one of the shortest of the lot, and one of the few offering interior scenes. Except for a half dozen replacements, the same sturdy chairs and tables

lined the wall opposite the bar, separated by a good eight to ten feet of open space for whatever might come to pass in a place where alcohol was sold and consumed. The same foot rails ran along the bottom of the long bar with battered spittoons, redolent of mephitic tobacco-laced spittle, stationed every three feet. The High Desert served not only as a watering hole over the years, but as meeting center, courtroom, post office, venue for the annual pool tournament and arm wrestling competition, and campaign headquarters for more than one aspiring Wind River politician.

It was nine o'clock at night when a wide-eyed Jesse Bodine and I were nearing the end of our second round. Of the three Bodine Brothers, Jesse, the oldest, was only just a tolerable drinking companion. We were discussing the ongoing fires in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest and the various methods being employed to counter them, when Rachel Wall walked into the High Desert Saloon on, as fate would have it, her last night. Wearing a pale yellow sheath dress that was just right and admirably tight, she turned the heads of everyone in the saloon, except for Jesse who seemed to be entranced with the idea of a forest consumed

by flames—I swear I could see reddish-orange streaks glowing in the irises of his eyes.

Rachel took a seat facing the front door at the farthest table from the entrance. She pulled a mirror compact from her purse, circling it in front of her face to reflect her every lovely angle in the inferior saloon light. She did a pinkie finger lipstick check at both corners of her mouth, and patted her hair here and there. I had the distinct impression she was preparing for a rendezvous of some description.

“I see this as an opportune moment,” I said setting my near-empty beer glass at her table and pulling myself up into the chair opposite her.

“For what?”

“To set the record straight.”

Rachel closed her eyes and exhaled so deeply I felt her warm breath on my face. “Why is it that someone who knows I detest him, cannot leave me alone?” she said.

“Perhaps it is because you find me—shall I say, repulsive—that I am drawn to you like a drowning man to the water’s surface.”

“Fuck off.”

"Please, that just encourages me." At that moment a patron dropped a coin in the jukebox, sending The Righteous Brothers to spinning with *You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling*.

She leaned forward slightly and snarled, "What do you want?"

I felt a prickly pleasure in baiting her, a sensation that started in my fat little feet and instantaneously arrived at the tip of my pointy ears. "I have it on good authority that you are not who you say you are." I was making every attempt to counter her churl with the most gracious tone I could rally.

Time folded into one of those highly-charged suspended moments as when spectators hold their breath watching the game-winning long ball arch in slow motion toward the centerfield homerun wall. Will it sail across or fall short? If I could see flames alight in the eyes of my pyromaniacal drinking partner, then I could surely see focused fury in Rachel's.

The black velvet drape of silence lifted when she said, "What authority?" I'd hit a homerun.

"You've told the few people who gave enough of a shit to ask, that you were originally from Laramie, Wyoming.

Unless the gatekeeper of all records Laramie is incompetent or grossly derelict in his duties, there is no record of a Rachel Wall living or dead, married or single, who might even come close to your statistical match."

She smiled and shrugged her right shoulder slightly. "I actually once saw the Righteous Brothers perform," she said, her tone softening.

"This might come as something of a revelation to you, Rachel, but it's extremely difficult for anyone, even the most seasoned confidence man or woman, to entirely erase a trail." I paused long enough to calculate the effect of my words, and since I could discern nothing, added, "I know who you are and why you're in Wind River."

"I actually thought they were Negroes until I saw them in the flesh. They sound like Negroes, don't you think?" She stood and bent close to my ear, singing "*Bring back that lovin' feeling, / Whoa, than lovin' feeling, / 'Cause it's gone...gone....*"

###

Al Blue studied me as I finished telling him what he needed to know. He moved to Winona and circled her slowly. He settled his hands into his back pockets; his crooked

arms like featherless wings. If I didn't know better, I would have suspected Al was admiring the miracle machine that was Winona, imagining himself astride her on the open road experiencing the ecstasy of racing armorless through air at eighty or ninety miles an hour; but, I was certain Al didn't even see Winona. "I suspect you'll be showing me the information you have about Rachel Wall—or whoever she was," he said.

"Of course. Be advised, you'll be staring at a blank page," I said.

"Why'd you put a PI on her?"

"I can't ignore the scent of a mystery or a beautiful woman. And just imagine how tantalizing the mystery of a beautiful woman." Again, that Blue silence, the cock of the head, and a corner-eye look prompting me to continue. "When the equilibrium of our little community is disturbed, it's only natural that I hone in on the catalyst of change," I said.

"She mention who she was waiting for?" I shook my head, and allowed my suspicions to remain unspoken. "You ever see her at the High Desert with anyone before?" Al said.

"It was the first time I ever saw her there," I replied.

"What time did you leave the High Desert?"

"I can tell you within seconds. As I walked past the hardware store I noticed the television display in the window was still on—it's a color Motorola, I believe. Well, Matt Dillion had set everything right in Dodge City once again and the lovely Kitty Russell was pouring Matt a drink in the Long Branch Saloon. The closing credits were on the screen."

"*Gunsmoke* ends at eleven o'clock," he said. "That would put you leaving the saloon at what time?"

"Since the hardware store is one block from the High Desert, I'd put my time of departure at about ten minutes to eleven. And remember, since my legs are at most half the length of yours, it would take me at least twice as long to travel any distance," I added.

I noted a brief look of amusement as Al circled Winona once again. "What time did Rachel leave?" he said.

"Shortly before I did. I'd had my two beers and played Rachel a bit, and *entre nous*, an enormously satisfying experience. But, alas, it was time to home and to bed."

Al hung silent for a moment. I had the distinct impression he wasn't hearing any revelations. "Was Jesse Bodine sober enough at the time to corroborate your story?"

"Sober enough, I would guess."

"Steve Luehrs was on his final drive-around of the night. He saw Rachel headed in the direction of the hotel at about 10:45. The Firehouse Building and hardware store are in the opposite direction." Al made a single tscking sound before he asked, "Why'd you follow Rachel?" he said.

I didn't see Steve Luehrs' cruiser on the street that night. I suspected he was holed-up in the alley next to the High Desert napping his way through his shift, rallying in time to see our departures. "I inadvertently turned in the direction of the hotel. Rather like showering, the ablution is so automatic you don't give much thought to what you're doing and half-way through you wonder if you had actually scrubbed behind your ears and between your toes.

Apparently, Deputy Steve didn't mention that I turned in the opposite direction within a fraction of a moment."

"He didn't."

"Likely he picked up his nap where he left it off," I suggested.

"You mentioned she pulled a compact from her purse. She leave the High Desert with the purse?"

I had to think for a moment, not being a man who would necessarily notice a woman's accessories. "I'm fairly certain she did. It's missing, I assume?"

Al smiled at me with a flickering tolerance. "Someone who can verify where you were between eleven PM and two AM that night?"

"Most assuredly," I said.

###

How Pip ever talked the abductors into taking her instead of me shall forever remain a mystery. Winds and driving snow that at once terrified and fascinated me harbingered a winter storm that would rival the East Coast Blizzard of 1888. I was eight years old on that Christmas Eve in 1934, and Pip had celebrated her thirty-fourth birthday the summer before, though looking back on the photos of the time, she didn't look a minute past thirty. Grand Mae and Father had motored to the city earlier in the day for the annual holiday celebration for Dandee Diaper employees and their families. Since the house staff had been given the night and next day off, Pip and I were alone

in the library of the grand old family manse of well over six-thousand square feet. Pip read aloud the last sentence of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*: *May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!*

And poof...the entire house went to black.

Hand-in-hand we made our way to the library window. The fact the house was set back a good quarter of a mile from the street allowed for a degree of privacy and some vulnerability to be sure. The distant street lights shown through the driving snow like St. Elmo's Fire on the masts of a spectral sailing ship. Pip said, that's odd. It looks as if just our power is out.

Pip's flashlight, which she always seemed to have at the ready, easily sliced through the darkness. I whispered to her that I was scared. She told me it was healthy to have some fear of the dark, and that she was a bit uneasy herself. We shall make this a game, she announced. What kind of game happens in the dark, I wanted to know. At times the best of games, she answered. We shall be cave explorers. I don't like caves, I said. We shall be Egyptologists descending into the dark depths of a newly

discovered pyramid full of mummies and golden treasure. I don't like pyramids. You like earthworms, don't you? I adore earthworms, I said. Then we shall be earthworms burrowing through the soil to the safe, rich, warmth of our subterranean home.

In our best effort to imitate the wave movement of the earthworm, we crawled our way up the wide, curving staircase toward our second floor bedrooms. I pointed out to Pip that we were moving up instead of down. She responded that we were upper crust earthworms. What sound do we make? We don't, she said. We have neither ears nor eyes. We survive by sense and smell alone.

The unnerving clank of breaking window glass immediately followed by tinkling as it shattered on the tiled kitchen floor pulled me to Pip like iron to lodestone. She wrapped her arms around me and shushed in my ear. We worms were half-way to the second floor landing when two masked intruders, the beams of their flashlights full on our faces, forced us to stop. Pip clutched me tighter as she pointed her flashlight down the staircase toward the men. *What the hell do you want?*

Only one of the men spoke. His voice was deep and oddly calming, despite the clear intention. We were to proceed to my bedroom where I was to get out of my pajamas and put on warm clothes, coat, hat, and galoshes. What about Pip's winter coat I asked the man, assuming she was included in the escapade. She won't need one, he said. Pip's hand tightened like a tourniquet around my arm.

Pip yelled that the men couldn't tell us what to do, punctuating her proclamation by hurling her flashlight toward the speaking man. The torch caromed off the non-speaking intruder and onto the last step, resting at such an angle that it cast its light on the pistol he held in his hand.

The dreadful 1932 kidnapping and murder of the twenty-month old baby of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh cast a shadow of lingering fear over any family with even a whiff of financial security during the Great Depression. Safety and security for the children of families of even moderate means was paramount.

Pip pushed me forward up the stairs. We scurried toward my bedroom at the end of the hallway. She shoved me in and slammed the door behind me. Lock it and stay there,

she warned. I, of course, sought immediate refuge under my bed, shoving aside small mounds of little boy ephemera and refuse from comic books to petrified orange peels and rock-hard bread crusts. I heard rustling and grunting outside my door and then a hard thump. Oh, God, I thought, they've killed my Pip. Then the muffled arguing between Pip and the speaking man that lasted for what felt like a child's forever. I couldn't determine what they were saying, but the tone devolved into something akin to that of a civilized negotiation. And then complete silence until I heard the front door slam.

Quivering with fear, cold, and a too-full bladder, I stayed put, listening the night long for sounds that never came—Grand Mae and Father's return or Pip calling to me that all was well. At the next morning's first light, I ventured from the apocryphal safety of my bed's cold underbelly and stealthily made my way to the first floor. The broken window in the kitchen had allowed the driven snow to accumulate and melt on the floor around the shards of window glass, looking every bit like glacial ice floating on a shallow sea. That kitchen scene and the

absence of Pip were the only indicators that anything untoward had happened the night before.

The blizzard had delayed Grand Mae and Father's departure from the city until daylight. They arrived home mid-morning. By late afternoon two police detectives in greatcoats and oversized galoshes made their way by foot up our drifted driveway. The blizzard had covered any traces the intruders would have left—no footprints or tire tracks.

Seventy-two hours following Pip's disappearance there was still no ransom demand, no phone call, nor even a cryptic ad in the personal columns in the newspaper. Nothing. With no evidence or demands, the police were stymied. Father and Grand Mae were beyond frustration and anger. We waited on tenterhooks. I despaired of ever seeing Pip again.

It was during these leaden hours and days that I came to understand the importance of listening. Sitting quietly in a corner of a room or at the top or bottom of the staircase, fiddling with a toy or feigning interest in a book, I managed to listen to adult talk that offered invaluable insight. Like our Shadow hero, I learned invisibility. The lead detective, a burly man with a

partial cleft lip poorly camouflaged by a sparse mustache, treated my father and Grand Mae with great deference. The other detective, younger than his partner and with thick black pomaded hair, was abrupt and clearly annoyed at being called out on such a miserable day.

"Why would these men take Miss Pippin and not the child?" the burly detective asked Father. They were standing in the foyer just as the grandfather clock pealed midnight, chiming the end of another day without Pip. I was in the dim at the top of the stairs, my dark pajamas blending in with the mahogany balustrade.

Father prefaced his response with his typical noncommittal grunt. "I can only surmise," he said. "My sister is an extraordinarily resourceful woman."

There was a disquieting silence until the pomaded detective said, "I'm thinking she convinced them 'cause your son's a midget, you know, not a normal kid, he ain't as valuable as a pretty gal."

Father said, "I embrace the immutable principle that all human life is of equal value. Let us hope the light of the new day will bring a resolution to our woes. Good night to you, sirs." His words to the detectives burned into my

soul as I sat atop the staircase. Father gently shut the door behind the men. He turned off the foyer light, and then returned to turn it on once again, hoping, I am certain, that Pip would require illumination upon her return.

I waited as Father climbed the stairs; each of his steps had its own agony. He was a man crushed under the burden of his precious sister's disappearance and the ardent belief that she had sacrificed herself for me. Father swept me up into his arms and kissed my forehead with such divine tenderness that to this day I feel his lips upon my brow.

For eight days I experienced a marked hopelessness and uselessness without equal. I couldn't eat or sleep, neither could I manage to move my bowels. Father dosed me with castor oil at night followed by his own therapeutic allotment of whiskey. A week and a day after I cowered under my bed as Pip vanished into the storm, she returned to us. I watched from my bedroom window on the dawn of that pigeon-gray January morning as a figure in oversized men's clothing trudged up the driveway. When the figure looked up to my window and offered the open-palmed gesture of half

wave and half salute that I knew so well, I fisted both my eyes and rubbed hard to make sure I saw what I wanted desperately to see and then I shit my britches.

I was never to speak of the incident again. But what of the men who stole her away, I demanded of Father. He told me the lid on that coffin was nailed shut.

###

Al's questions regarding my whereabouts following my departure from the High Desert Saloon on the night Rachel died were clearly warranted. As it happened Pip was waiting for me at the *Tribune* office on a matter of the utmost urgency. "Talk to Pip," I told Al, hesitating before I continued. "I've never been considered a suspect, well, except for that minor misunderstanding at the A&P when I was six."

"Over?"

"A five-cent box of Jujubes, for chrissake. Nonetheless, I find my current status exciting."

"Tuck the excitement in your wallet, Rufus. You're not a suspect," he said. Al gently tapped Winona's leather saddle and high-signed his thanks as he turned to leave, but stopped before passing into the sunlight. "You really

don't know who Rachel was or what she was doing in Wind River, do you?"

"I can honestly say that I do not."

###

Rensselaer County Picayune

January 20, 1935

Bodies Found

The bodies of two unidentified men were discovered late Tuesday afternoon near Riley Cove at Saratoga Lake. Barend van Rijn, a resident of Saratoga, New York, was ice fishing when he hooked the jacket of one of the deceased. "I reeled up thinking I'd caught a big one. Caught a big one, I did," Mr. van Rijn said.

Local police used an ice hook to retrieve the first body, a fully clothed male of approximately thirty-five years of age. A second body, approximately the same age and wearing only a union suit, was tied to the first body. The men were bound together back-to-back at the wrists and ankles. "Kind of hard to tell since them bodies were all bloated, but looked to me like them fellas both had their throats cut," Mr. van Rijn said.

Police suspect this may be a mob hit. An autopsy is planned later for in the week.

Chapter Nine

One week to the day before Rachel's death, Bridey sat on the bench at her vanity table, its tri-fold beveled mirror echoing her gentle beauty. Rachel Wall stood behind, running a brush through the younger woman's hair. Rachel's head was slanted slightly to one side as she slowly pulled the brush through the silky black tresses that reached to mid-back. Then she cradled the gathered hair in her hand as if it were a priceless stringed instrument and the brush her bow, pulling it through again and again and again. Captured in the three mirrors, Rachel's face bore a most agreeable aspect with her eyes near tender and her lips with a caring turn.

Wallace and I gave Bridey the vanity on the event of her eighth Christmas. She'd wanted a chavel mirror, but Cal put the kibosh on that idea saying she was too young for such an extravagance. He wasn't too excited about the vanity set to be sure; but, by the time he could voice his objections, Wallace and I had it wrapped and ribboned at the side of the Christmas tree. With *Webster's Universal Unabridged Dictionary Volumes I and II* as boosters, little

girl Bridey was thrilled beyond words to see her front and two sides at the same time. She held her head straight-on as her eyes darted left, right, and left again. Her fuzzy-stockinged feet dangled midair between bench and floor.

And there she sat nearly a dozen years later with her feet to the floor and no need for *Webster's*. I had been on a mission to retrieve two library books from Wallace's bedroom, I distinctly remember the tomes—*Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*; and *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Wallace had been on an inexplicable exploration of Herman Melville for several weeks, reading all the Melville available in the Wind River County Library and some offerings twice. I gladly volunteered to retrieve his books and meet him at the library.

As I tread upon the third floor hallway from the stair I heard Bridey's lilting tones and the antipodal grating, gravelly voice of Rachel Wall. I cozied up to the wall where I knew the floorboards didn't squeak at every footfall. Bridey's door was open enough for me to see the reflections of the two women deeply involved in a moment of female prettifying, while I remained obscured from their line of sight.

###

For the living participants at an autopsy, Doc Nichols suggested the most malodorous cigar, mentholated unguent in and under the nose, or powerful mint candies tucked between the upper lip and gums. Because I was always called upon to snap autopsy photos when no one else was available, or if a certain negligent deputy had yet to replace a broken camera, I was present along with Al Blue at the external autopsy of the woman we knew as Rachel Wall. I had slathered Mentholatum within and beneath my nose. Doc had a nasty working stogy in the corner of his mouth. I wasn't aware that Al used anything to stave off the profoundly disgusting odor of rapid human decay.

It was my good fortune to spend a scant thirty minutes with Al, Doc, and the body in the basement morgue of Wind River County Hospital that morning. I suspected the morgue's character hadn't changed since the hospital was built in the late 1920s. It was crowded with a large sink; a freestanding lamp; two big-door refrigeration units, each with three body levels; a mobile cart with requisite postmortem paraphernalia; a large basin on a stand; and a heavy-duty weight scale with a pan. A bulky reel-to-reel

tape recorder rested atop a lopsided stainless steel cart. Three bare, near-blinding light bulbs hung from the ceiling. The recently purchased state-of-the-art stainless steel autopsy table complete with drains, sinks, and hoses was as incongruent with the outdated equipment as an orchid in a bramble bush. The equipment, three live men, and one deceased woman made for a room too tight for tears.

Al and I stood across the autopsy table from Doc. Between us lay the naked truth of Rachel Wall. The tips of her fingers blackened from fingerprint ink. "Let's hope our victim had the opportunity to harvest some of the perpetrator's hair or skin," Doc said as he scraped evidence from beneath the fingernails. Doc punched on the tape recorder. "Initial autopsy of Rachel Wall, thirty-five years of age. A well-nourished Caucasian female approximately five feet seven inches, 130 pounds. For the record, fingerprints of the deceased have been taken and recorded. Since the deceased appeared to be in the water for a short time, glycerin was injected under the skin of the fingertips to smooth the surface. Bruising on the neck suggests strangulation." Doc nodded in the direction of the body's southern hemisphere. "There's no visible sign of

rape." Disinclined toward Doc's nodding invitation, I began snapping photos of the necklace of purple and green around the throat.

Doc continued as he pried open Rachel's mouth, "Initial visual examination indicates presence of vomitus in the mouth, with signs of corrosive action and," he paused and bent closer. "Severe burning in and around the mouth area." Doc turned off the recorder. "Any comments so far, Sheriff?"

"I'll need a semen test," Al said looking around the room distractedly.

Doc continued his thorough external examination, with his running commentary that would be transcribed later. To my great relief Doc Nichols finally snapped a white muslin sheet over the body with the dexterity of a seasoned stage magician covering an object fated to vanish. "I'd say homicide for sure, but can't verify drowning, possible poisoning, or strangulation until I go in on her," Doc said.

"Rather an indelicate way to put that, Doc," I said.

He pulled the stogy from his between his lips, scrutinized its ash end, and said, "Soon as you're elected

County Medical Examiner, you can refer to the cuttin' and goin' in just about any way you want, Rufus." He flicked ash on the floor and replaced the cigar. "If we don't have water in the lungs, I'd verify strangulation. The mouth burns suggest a corrosive agent that may have helped her along. I'll order a toxicology. I'll finish with the body by tomorrow at the latest. Then release to next-of-kin, if that's okay with you, Al."

"We're working on next-of-kin." Al shot a quick glance at me. "You treat Miss Wall for anything during her stay with us, Doc?" With arms folded across his chest, Al stared down at the sheet-draped body.

"A prescription for Demerol. Migraine headaches. Menstrual, as I recall."

"You examine her or just write the prescription?" Al asked.

"She had a prescription from the issuing physician in California. I just refilled it," Doc answered prosaically.

"You check it out to see if it was legit?" Al asked.

"Who has time to do that?" Doc said.

"I'd think that would be standard practice," Al said.

"Well, you think wrong, Sheriff," Doc said then added, "Earl Hamby never questioned any prescription I issued."

Al set a long, silent look on Doc and then with a small measure of menace in his tone said, "I'll need to see the prescription. And I'd like that toxicology analysis as soon as possible."

Doc's surly attitude intensified as he said, "That's going to cost the county a shitload."

Al ran his hand along his cheekbone and held it to his chin as he continued to stare at Rachel Wall's draped body. "Do the analysis."

###

Pip insisted that I ride in the sidecar and that she assume the driving position astride Winona. Pip said with great authority that *no woman wants to be mounted the same way by the same man for all eternity, and I would guess the same holds true for a machine.* By the time my brain thawed from the image, Pip had borrowed a pair of Dickie bib overalls from Delight, tied a fine red silk scarf babushka style under her chin, and was swinging one leg over Winona for her first motorcycle drive. She listened intently to an abbreviated tutorial as to the proper manipulation of

Winona's clutch and gears, and was, of course, a quick study. After a few false starts and about a half mile of terrifying zigging and zagging, we were off to my bi-monthly visit Thelma Scoffone.

My summers of childhood, were spent accompanying Grand Mae and Pip when they went calling on friends and family. Usually these visits entailed motor trips of twenty or fewer miles every other Wednesday afternoon. It was during these visits that I developed an extreme aversion to Darjeeling tea, croquette, and cucumber sandwiches; contrarily, my desire for gingersnaps, macaroons, and gossip flourished. Either in the protective custody of a screened summer porch or the canopy of fawning shade trees on freshly mown lawn, I was schooled in the proper consolation for survivors of the recently departed, manners and behaviors befitting a gracious guest, the art of posing appropriate questions without appearing overly inquisitive, and the priceless virtue of stealthy observation. Return trips home were occupied with considerable, albeit kind, evaluation of the hostess, her domicile, and the sundry issues over which she anguished or delighted.

"What is it exactly that you're delivering to Thelma?" Pip asked as we made our way up the Scoffone sidewalk toward her front porch.

"Just some paperwork," I said.

Pip stopped me as she laid her hand on my arm. "She's your Aunt Alice advice columnist," she said with a rim of discovery delight in her tone.

Harvey answered our knock at the open screen door and led us to the backyard where his mother sat in her wheelchair in the shade of an enormous sun umbrella stuck in the middle of a patio table. "Thank you, dear," Thelma said to Harvey. "Will you get us some refreshments, please?"

Thelma wore a blue-green paisley shirtwaist dress and had a light cotton blanket covering her knees and withered legs. A string of pearls encircled her thin neck. The matching earrings appeared far too burdensome for her tiny lobes. She accepted my offered opened hand. I bowed and kissed the back of her hand ever so gently and said, "You look absolutely stunning, Thelma."

The small fenced backyard was a slab of concrete with half a dozen large terra cotta pots of well-maintained

post-bloom and blooming flowers. Mature maple and poplar trees prospered in each corner of the yard.

After some minor chitchat about the weather and Pip's apology for her unusually mannish attire, Harvey returned with a tray of iced soft drinks and Oreo cookies. "Anything else I can get you, Mom?" he asked.

Thelma smiled and nodded. Harvey bent over and kissed her on the cheek; she reached up and stroked his cheek.

"I'll be back to help with dinner," he said, waving over his shoulder as he made a hasty retreat.

"He's a fine boy, isn't he?" Thelma said.

"I can see he takes good care of you," Pip piped in with a smile that had an agonizing grip her face. The roar of Harvey's car as he left the driveway nearly drowned out Pip's words.

"Harvey does good work at the *Tribune*. He may have a career in journalism. Perhaps photojournalism," I offered.

"That would please me," Thelma said. "Although I truly don't know what I would do without him. But, he has to get on with his life," she added with resolve.

I pulled a thin envelope from my back pocket and slid it across the table to Thelma. "Only a few letters to Aunt

Alice in the last couple of weeks," I said. I caught Thelma's concerned glance at Pip. "Not to worry all secrets are safe with Pip."

"Rufus and I have successfully managed to keep Aunt Alice a secret for years. Even from my husband and son. Rufus hand-delivers the letters and I mail the responses back to him. So much subterfuge and intrigue. It's been fun, hasn't it, Rufus?"

"You're the one who does the work," I said. "I hope it is fun for you."

Thelma's expression turned cheerless. "Since I can't solve my own problem," she said with open arms and a shrug. "Suggesting possible resolutions to others' problems buoys my spirits."

Pip separated her Oreo cookie, examined the frosting, and replaced the two halves in a circular motion with the words, "There's a resolution waiting to ambush any problem comes down the pike," Pip said.

"Is there any news about that poor Wall woman's death? I do hope the killer is caught soon," Thelma said, genuine concern with a hint of fear in her tone.

"Now, Thelma, you needn't worry," I said. "I may be speaking out of turn here, but evidence points to the real possibility she was killed by someone who knew her. Someone from her past."

"How do you know that?" Thelma asked. Pip shot me a skeptical look.

"Call it informed intuition," I said.

###

"Rest assured I can teach anyone to dance," I told Bridey as we stood in the middle of the hotel lobby at ten o'clock the evening Pip and I returned from calling on Thelma Scoffone. Furniture had been pushed to the walls to provide us ample room and the lamps were dimmed to a sallow glow. Wallace stood at the lobby desk next to Bridey's record player, ready to set the needle at my cue.

"Is it wrong to go ahead with Pip's party?" she asked.

"And why shouldn't we?" I demanded.

"Well, it's odd to be celebrating such a joyous occasion so close to the death of someone we knew. It just feels strange to me," she said.

"Rachel Wall was a virtual stranger to us. And Pip, well, Pip is like everyone's favorite auntie, isn't she?"

"Yes, but..."

"I really didn't know Rachel, but I would guess she wasn't one to pass up a party for any reason. Don't you agree?"

After a moment's consideration and an anemic smile, Bridey nodded and took a deep breath. "So, who thought it would be a good idea to have an orchestra for Pip's birthday party?" she asked, clearly to change the subject.

"It's a chamber ensemble of six musicians, not an orchestra," I said. "Pip is a most talented ballroom dancer with a great love for the waltz. Additionally, being a woman of refinement and taste, she would want an ensemble for ambient music," I said.

Bridey frowned. "Why can't we just play records? You'd help with that wouldn't you, Wallace?" Wallace offered a noncommittal grunt in response.

"Not to worry, we'll have some records for dancing. Now, we'll go over a few basic dance steps and before you know it, you'll be the belle of the ball."

"I don't want to be the belle of anyone's ball," Bridey said.

"Your stubbornness is so like Wallace," I said. "Isn't that right, Wallace?" I turned to face my friend.

"What's right?" Wallace said as he practiced perfect placement of the needle into the record's starting groove.

"He says you and I are too stubborn," Bridey said.

Wallace continued concentrating on the needle and said, "Too stubborn for what?" he said, casting a brief look of amusement.

"Just listen for my cue to start the music," I barked, my patience worn lean. Wallace raised his finger in quick salute accepting my order. "Now, Bridey darlin', don't be nervous. Everyone has to learn to dance at some time in her life," I stepped closer to her. "I'm mortified we haven't done this before, aren't you, Wallace?"

"Didn't we teach her the Hokey-Pokey when she was in kindergarten?" Wallace asked. He then made a complete 360 degree turn singing, "And I turn myself around. And that's what it's all about."

"A primitive participation ritual," I said. "It constitutes a dangling and jiggling of body parts. It is not dancing." Bridey laughed uproariously, but stifled when she noted my displeasure. "Now, I'll show you what we call

the closed ballroom hold. It requires the maintenance of five points of contact between partners. We have three hand holds." I took her right hand in my left and said, "One."

"Where did you learn to dance, Rufus?" she asked.

"*The Arthur Murray Dance Party.*"

"You learned to dance watching a television show?" She tried unsuccessfully to stifle another paroxysm of laughter.

"And the Stella Davenport Correspondence School of Dance," I announced proudly. Like an athlete readying my body for competition, I rotated my head and loosened my shoulders. "Arm and hand placement is of the utmost importance to give the couple a deportment of regal appearance," I said. "Now rest your hand on the top of my right arm, this is contact point two." Bridey did as she was directed. I placed my right hand on Bridey's back, as close to her left shoulder as I could possibly manage. "And now we have contact point three."

I shot a glance in Wallace's direction. He was smiling as broadly as I had ever seen him. "I'll thank you to keep your unspoken editorial comments to yourself, Wallace."

Wallace ostensibly focused once again on the turntable. I had selected Bobby Darin's *A True True Love* as my instruction tune—a choice with perfect waltz tempo. "All right, Wallace, bring Mr. Darin into the room, but keep him subdued." Bobby Darin's voice twined into the quiet around us.

I continued, "You'll notice your left elbow rests on my right elbow. This is contact point four."

Bridey glanced at our elbows. "Given the disparity in our heights, it really isn't," she offered. "I'm five-eight and you're what...four foot four?"

"As I've told all my partners over the years, use your imagination. Your left elbow would rest on my right elbow."

Bridey closed her eyes. "Gottcha."

Bobby's voice and the waltz rhythm prompted Wallace to the center of the lobby. Maintaining the proper posture of a partner in the lead, Wallace danced around us with his compliant imaginary partner.

"Pay no attention to the man dancing around us." I paused as Bridey looked from me to Wallace and back to me again. "Thank you. Now, contact point number five, you'll have to bend over here," I said.

"How many contact points do we have again?" she asked.

"Five," I said.

Bridey hunched lower, then got down to her knees.

"Good," I said. "The right area of the chest of each partner touches that of the other."

Neither Bridey nor Wallace could hold on any longer. She fell to her side in an uncontrollable giggle fit while Wallace's exquisite laughter filled the room as he waltzed around us.

###

Dear Aunt Alice,

I have fallen for someone who doesn't seem to notice I even exist. He pays occasional attention to me only when our paths cross. But for the most part, there's little to no acknowledgement. I've tried everything from subtle invitations to join me for a drink to quasi-seductive apparel. But no response. What can I do to attract the romantic attention I want from this person?

Signed,

Lonely in Wind River County

Dear Lonely,

Honey, short of boxing his ears or tying his tail in a tight knot, it doesn't sound as if he will tumble to the fact you're interested. Try the direct approach, realizing he may well turn you down. Or worse, he could agree to a date and he's a total loser. Remember, chances of selling your house increase dramatically when you post a "for sale" sign in the front yard.

###

The Harvest Dance, Caulfield Hotel, October 15, 1920—Belle of the Ball is Wind River Reel Number 75. Prominently featured in this reel is a dazzling young woman who must have nestled as deeply in the unknown photographer's heart and soul as she did mine. I christened her Amelia for the remarkable likeness she bares to Amelia Earhart. The wide, tight-lipped smile and occasional gap-toothed grin, large kind eyes with a hint of flirtatiousness, and short curly hair with a few coiled locks that find their way to the middle of her forehead are breathtaking. I owned a comforting familiarity with her that tarried in my mind.

My best guess is that at the time the film was shot this girl was in her mid to late twenties. The reel opens with Amelia at the front porch steps of the Caulfield

Hotel. A decorative display of corn shocks, pumpkins, gourds, and hay bales flank the doors of the hotel. Though the background images are somewhat out of focus, Virgil-Virginia Caulfield is recognizable standing on the porch with hands resting on robust hips, chatting in a most amicable manner with a woman whose back is to the camera. Like water slipping past midstream boulders, men, women, and children move around Amelia as they enter the hotel—some look to the camera with a smile and wave, others ignore the blossoming scene before them. Amelia remains always in focus.

At first she portrays a certain reticence toward the camera, but after a few beats of a throbbing heart becomes near coquettish. She mouths something toward the camera that I am confident—I had run the reel countless times, and if the signs of use on the celluloid were any indication, so did the man behind the camera—that she speaks the words *don't be silly, I can't do that*. She laughs, holding her tiny fist to her lips in a clear attempt to hide the grin that probably liquefied the photographer where he stood. She wears a sleeveless gown with two full flounces in front like faux aprons. The gown's hem is just above her trim

ankles. She turns quickly on her heel to ascend the hotel steps. A Wind River breeze enters the scene to mold the fabric of her dress to her trim bottom and long, straight back. She turns to face the camera once again, bending forward and smiling widely. She makes a dismissive gesture then blows a kiss from her lips through the camera, to the photographer, to me.

With virtually nothing to go on, I searched all available county records for this Belle of the Ball. I naively thought her name may actually have been Belle, but that lead was as flimsy as a damselfly wing. With great difficulty I managed to capture an image of Amelia from the original film, but it was a bootless effort as not a single Wind Riverian among the twenty-six who were around at the time could identify her with any certitude. Perhaps a cousin visiting from somewhere beyond Wind River County...perhaps the girl who worked as harvest cook that summer...what was her name...perhaps the Kansas girl who married Albert "Stinky" Kronengold but left after two months when she tumbled to the fact he only bathed every six weeks whether he needed to or not. In short, no one could come up with a concrete lead. What was driving me in

my search for the Belle of the Ball, other than my propensity to remove the veil from any mystery that tickled my curiosity, was the sense of overpowering loss at not having known her.

The hotel had only half a dozen guests the week of Pip's birthday celebration. Four salesman: a fusty fertilizer man with skin like the light brown, bumpy shell of a walnut from years of standing in farmers' fields peddling his wares; a beauty products salesman whose personal odor, a mixture of sweat, Old Spice aftershave, and lilac toilet water preceded his appearance by a good minute and lingered at his leaving; and a young buck-toothed vacuum cleaner salesman with a lazy eye and a pocket full of dirt; and an auto parts salesman who spent an inordinate amount of time showing his wares to Delight Daggett. And finally a Canadian couple making a leisurely trip south to Disneyland took a shine to Pip and decided to stay on an extra week for the gala. And of course there was Mrs. Orpha Rose Joiner.

Pip's birthday celebration proved to be a most memorable Wind River gathering with one-hundred and fifty-eight celebrants. Nonessential lobby furniture was moved

outside under a tarp, and chairs were relegated to the walls to allow for dancing. Red streamers hung from the fourteen spokes of the wagon wheel chandelier and one from the anomalous arrow. Wallace, Bridey, and I festooned the ceiling with miniature multi-colored Japanese lanterns and set decorative candles wherever space allowed, which was something of a risk considering the Bodine Brothers were expected to attend. We laid a most elegant spread of appetizers, beverages, and a plethora of individual birthday cupcakes. An enormous birthday sheet-cake with *Happy Birthday, Darling Pip* scrolled in red letters across its frosted plane, along with sixty-five red candles around its edges like waxen sentries.

The musical ensemble, four middle-aged hardscrabble farmers from eastern Wind River County, cleaned up remarkably well. They billed themselves as the Roustabout Quartet, and were a musical wonderment, rivaling any professional quartet I'd ever heard. The open invitation printed in the *Tribune*, along with a brief biography of Pip—sans the 1934 abduction escapade, made it clear the occasion was informal. In homage to Pip's obvious refinement, however, folks came in their Sunday best, with

the exception of Cledamae Howell and me. I wore my custom-made single button black satin-lapel tuxedo with side satin-stripped pants. And for some unfathomable reason Cledamae came dressed once again as the Mexican bandit Joaquin Murrieta.

Years later, when most of the principle players had moved on, jettisoned or modified memories beyond recognition, or died, Bridey related what happened that night with such detailed exactitude that I am wholly comfortable giving an account of the events as they unfolded, though I clearly cannot afford evidence of personal observation.

Midway through Pip's celebration, close to eleven o'clock on that dark, new moon night, Bridey and Harvey Scoffone danced their way to the garage fifty feet from the backside of the hotel, ostensibly for Harvey to smoke a cigarette. By her own admission Bridey was still so smitten by the young man that to refuse his request for company would have been to betray her most profound desire.

She made a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to avoid staring at Harvey as he leaned against the garage, his left leg bent with his foot flat against the wall, irresistible

with cigarette smoke spiraling around his handsome face. Bridey was so astonished at her good fortune to be with Harvey that she pinched the tender underside of her wrist as she held her hands behind her back. He took a long drag and blew the smoke moonward as he announced, "I'm joining the Marines." He let the sentence hang before adding, "I'll be leaving in September for boot camp at a place called Parris Island. You ever hear of it?"

"No."

"Me neither until I signed up. It's in South Carolina."

Despite no physical or emotional grounds to lay claim to Harvey Scoffone, Bridey felt ambushed by the news. Try as she might, her attempt to quash the brew of surprise and disappointment in her voice failed. "I thought your dad wanted you to go to college and to law school."

"Yeah, well, I don't give a shit what that bastard wants." A self-satisfied smirk distorted Harvey's face.

Bridey looked away, tossing about for just the right words. "I'll miss you," she finally said.

"Yeah." He pulled Bridey to him, kissing her and indulging himself with his hand on her breast, as if one

were requisite of the other. She pushed him away, but slumped forward into him again like the final domino in a falling row.

A slamming door and low voices from the back service porch of the hotel interrupted the youthful wooing. Harvey pulled Bridey into the shadowy corner of the garage. "It's Cal and that Rachel Wall and they don't look any too happy with each another," Harvey said.

Bridey and Harvey watched Cal take Rachel roughly by the arm down the back stairs; she resisted, losing her footing. Cal pulled her to her feet. They stopped in the penumbra of the only light illuminating the backyard, giving a gray haze to the pantomime to follow.

"We shouldn't be eavesdropping." Bridey stepped out from the corner of the garage. Harvey grabbed her wrist and pulled her back beside him.

"We're not," he whispered. "We can't actually hear them." The muffled sounds of ill-contained anger oozed toward them like a festering wound. Bridey knew well Cal's temper when as a youngster she had transgressed the bounds of his limitations; Wallace always the bulwark between adult anger and child behavior. In recent years, Cal had so

managed to bridle his temper that Bridey had slipped his volatile nature into a forgotten pocket.

Cal grabbed Rachel by her upper arms, raising her into his face such that only the tips of her toes were aground. Her body stiffened as he growled into her face, but that initial resistance vaporized and she relaxed, bending into him as if to either caress or consume. He dropped her to the ground and pushed her away. She stumbled backwards, out of the gray margin of illumination. Cal disappeared around the south side of the hotel.

Rachel entered the full circle of light. And as Bridey recounted, and as I have witnessed in women adapted to manhandle, she shrugged the encounter off, straightened her dress over her hips, smoothed her stockings up each leg, and tidied her hair. She took the stairs into the hotel, but stopped to half-turn and stare into the night as someone who feels a watcher at her back.

Chapter Ten

Upon arriving home the night Rachel Wall and I had our brief encounter at the High Desert, I opened my door to see Pip sleeping in the scarred Country French chair in my apartment above the *Tribune* office, a bottle of Bushmill's and a glass with a lilliputian puddle of amber stood watch on the side table. She had an open volume resting in her lap—my first edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a gift from Father upon graduation from Wesleyan. I sat across from her on the only slightly less scarred matching sofa. The chair and sofa, upholstered in puce crushed velvet, were a brownish purplish abomination. Were it not for the fact the set was a legacy from previous tenants, and with the exception of Wallace and Bridey, few people were ever subjected to their disturbing hue, I would have replaced them early on.

Pip's mouth was open a bit as she emitted a comforting noise more gentle sigh than snore, her lovely face in profile bent toward her right shoulder. She must have felt me watching her as she slept, for she stirred uneasily and awoke.

"How was your evening on the town, Rufus?" she said, straightening in the chair. Pip emptied the glass of its remaining whiskey as I answered.

"Not entirely wasted. I had a chat with the ever fascinating Rachel Wall this evening. However, the encounter was less than enlightening."

"She owned up to nothing then."

"Nothing. However, I caught the subtle whiff of concern of one whose pustule of deceit may be festering to the surface."

"A lovely image, Rufus," she said.

"How are you getting on with Joyce?"

"I'm not. The volume rests upon my lap simply to buttress my glass as I studied the way the light plays with the rich color of the whiskey."

"Joyce would be honored."

"This is the time of revelation," Pip announced. "It is time we set the record straight."

After a moment's thought to revelations and records in need of straightening, I naturally assumed Pip was going to give an accounting of her abduction in 1934, and the likely fate of the two men responsible. My palms moistened and my

heart began to race like a stretch runner with the finish line in sight. "Finally," I proclaimed.

In one graceful motion Pip pulled herself from the chair, swept up the whiskey bottle, and nestled next to me on the sofa. I felt the tingling warmth of her thigh and shoulder as she leaned against me. Her whiskey breath merged with the delicate floral fragrance I knew without fail she dabbed behind each ear and at each wrist following her morning toilet and before her evening meal. She took my hand, twining her long, thin fingers with the stubs that were mine, holding tight for a moment, as if drawing strength from the message she was about to deliver. "You'd best take a hearty swig of this, my boy. You may well need it," she said offering the bottle.

"I've been waiting a long time for this," I said. I took a great gulp that sent that beneficial burn from mouth to throat. "It was only out of respect that I refrained from inquiries that might offend or open deep wounds."

Pip patted my knee in a most reassuring manner. "Do you consider that you came to Wind River by design or that it was a random choice?" she asked.

I was confused. "A bit of both I would suppose. Grand Mae was headed in this direction when she had the accident. The circle she drew on the map around Wind River County likely influenced my choice."

"And your father gave you several choices as to which newspaper he would buy for you."

"Father encouraged me toward Wind River and this newspaper, though I realized from the onset it was not the best investment."

"I questioned it myself at the time. But I now believe his ultimate goal was to connect you with a certain time and place and people," Pip said followed by a share of the Irish burn straight from the bottle.

###

Grand Mae took her first motor trip into the West in the early autumn days in a 1919 Pierce-Arrow Passenger Touring automobile. According to her journal the route from New York to Seattle and home again took her over paved, cobblestone, gravel, dirt roads, and some backwoods trails she blazed on her own. Pip's pain from the death of her Darling in France two years earlier was still so sharply present in her life that joining Grand Mae on her western

tour would have been a fool's journey. By her own admission, Pip was not the best of company in those days.

With two weeks' layering of dust and dirt on the Pierce-Arrow, Grand Mae headed into the high desert country of central Washington, within a long day's drive of Seattle. It was nearing early evening when Grand Mae, hungry, dirty, hot, and anxious for a night's sleep on a bed that didn't echo the disposition of the various roads and byways she had traversed, pulled up in front of Wind River's Caulfield Hotel.

It was not divine providence or a fortuitous turn down a hardpan back road that led Mae Pippin to Wind River. With the exception of the fatal clash with the western red cedar in Montana, Mae Pippin did nothing by accident. The small community and the Caulfield Hotel had been her destination all along.

By virtue of a sizable fortune left to her by her husband and an aching tenderness for any child left alone by fate or choice, Mae became a benefactress to the Bristol Orphan Asylum, and thus, gained access to all files. The discreet inquiry into the lot of Alice Mae Caulfield made in 1890 by a solicitor in Spokane, Washington, who at the

end of his career was not above revealing confidential information for the betterment of a desperate soul or the indigent turn of his purse, set Mae on the trail of her mother.

###

At Pip's direction I retrieved from the basement the half dozen Wind River Reels from October 1920 and set up the movie projector in the middle of my apartment. Accompanied by the music of the projector's comforting clicking whir, the films played against a wall made naked for the purpose. The quaint, endearing *tranches de la vie* was revealed frame by frame by frame. Pip sat spellbound as she watched a score of jubilant recently franchised women marching down Main Street holding a waist-high banner that roared *Women Voters for Harding and Coolidge*; Jonathan and Ethel Faircloth welcoming guests at his newly opened law office, to be occupied decades later by Ardis Dardanell; a fire at Bateman's Livery; new bride Verna Jean Kretzinger throwing her bouquet over the railing of the Caulfield Hotel to a throng of eager maidens. And finally, Reel Number 75 *Belle of the Ball*.

"There she is, Rufus." Pip's excitement ricocheted around the room. She moved to the wall. Through my muddled haze of the very early morning hour and the lingering blur of too much alcohol, Pip appeared to meld with the flat images as if she were there at the Fall Harvest Ball in 1920 Wind River. "There on the porch with her back to the camera talking to that man. It's Mae. I know it is." Pip turned to me. "It's your Grand Mae. I'd know that coat, that hat, and that broad-beamed bottom anywhere."

"She's talking with Virgil-Virginia Caulfield, the infamous cross-dressing founder of this township," I said.

"And look here," Pip said laying her hand flat against the wall on the heart of Belle of the Ball as she blows the kiss from her lips through the camera, to the photographer, to me. "It's your mother."

Unbeknownst to me until that moment, my mother Hope Pippin Dandee traveled with Grand Mae on that first journey into the West. Had it not been for Pip's sad state of love lost, she could have borne witness to the events. Instead she had stitched together irregularly shaped pieces to offer one helluva heritage crazy quilt.

"As near as I can tell, Mae and Hope spent a week in Wind River that October. The pages chronicling their visit were cut from Mae's journal." Pip was back in the chair, the angled Venetian blinds allowing the dawning sun to slat golden light on her weary face. "In an effort to organize the history of our lives, I did a quick tour through Mae's journals. Believing a journal to be the sole property of the diarist, I had neither reason nor inclination to read it. That is until I came to the vestiges of carefully excised pages in the gutter of the journal for 1920."

"Excised by whom?"

Pip rested her head against the back of the chair. She closed her eyes and released a sigh born of utter fatigue. "One would assume the diarist, of course. But the more I wrestled with the idea of Mae committing something to paper, then destroying it for fear someone might read it who shouldn't, was foolish. She was too mindful of her every word and deed."

"You've deduced, I assume, that Virginia Caulfield Erlewine was Grand Mae's mother, Hope's grandmother, and, therefore, my great-grandmother." I paused before adding, "And you believe it was Father who removed the pages."

Pip's eyes remained closed. Her words came heavier and slower pushing through the morass of her exhaustion.

"Perhaps he intended to protect you from the truth of your heritage. I can only suspect he must have thought a woman who successfully passes herself off as a man for a lifetime would have cast a long shadow of shame over the Dandee family." Pip smiled and turned to me, but didn't open her eyes. "I, on the other hand, see it as a brilliant deception," she said smiling.

"Grand Mae didn't confront Virginia Erlewine with her suspected truth," I said. "The last letter Virginia wrote to Jonathan Faircloth made only slight mention, and certainly no concern, for the fate of the child she left behind."

"There is no solvent so strong as to remove the stain of abandonment from a child's heart," Pip said softly. "Mae wouldn't trot out information she thought might harm or slander anyone."

"If Father's intention was to keep this information from me, why did he steer me toward Wind River?" I asked.

"Your father's mastery of rational thought slipped inch by inch after Hope died. Subtle at first, hardly

noticeable, even to those of us who were so dear to him. But in the end, the young girl at the automat—well, we need not dwell on that.”

Father must have felt late remorse for wiping out the story of Grand Mae and Hope’s visit to Wind River, and for that matter, eradicating the memory of my mother from our lives all together. As a child I longed for Father to sit me down and ask, Son, what do you want to know about your mother? I, of course wanted to know everything, but settled on knowing the color of her hair in different light, the sound of her voice from near and far, her favorite song, and the magnitude of her disappointment at not having a normal baby. As I came to understand the depth of Father’s pain and to know the boundless love of Grand Mae and Pip, desire for my mother’s memory faded.

Somehow Father managed to guide me to Wind River and serendipitous discovery of the oeuvre of an anonymous cameraman who wrapped his artful arms around my mother and held her tight until my arrival. Everlasting redemption.

“Who should know this now?” I asked.

“Those who should, do,” Pip said and then drifted off to a well-deserved respite.

###

In all the years we had known one another, perhaps only a half-dozen times did Herbert Woodcock take the short walk from Woodcock's Drugs, past Ardis Dardanell's accounting office, then on to the *Tribune* Office. August 19, 1965, the afternoon following the discovery of Rachel's body, was one of those times. I was pounding away on the Royal when Herbert cleared his throat at the threshold of the open doors. "Do you have a minute?" he said.

Continuing to pound away, I cast my look up through the visor of my green eyeshade. Cast in the emerald green of my visored-vision, Herbert looked every bit a character of Frank Baum's imagination stepping toward me from the Land of OZ. Herbert was sans lab coat, but with soda jerk cap hanging on the side of his head like a kitten with claws latched halfway up a drape. "Ah, the local apothecary," I said. "Come. And I hope to God I have more than just one minute. What brings you so far from home and in uniform no less?" I pointed toward his cap, which he whipped from his head.

Herbert's uneasiness played out as he fidgeted with the cap for a long moment before he said, "It's tragic about Miss Wall. Word is she was murdered."

"Looks like." I removed the eyeshade to better view Herbert in shades of ordinary.

"No murders around here since the Faircloth affair," he said.

"Not since," I said.

Herbert shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again, forcing his attention around the room as if looking for a topic to anchor thoughts and words. Finally he settled on Winona. "How's she running these days?" *God bless Winona.*

"As smooth as a balding pate," I said removing the eyeshade and running my hand over the crown of my head where a Friar Tuck was increasing its bounding lines at an alarming rate. I motioned for Herbert to sit.

"I have a product over at the pharmacy that might help with that, or at least slow it down. It's a paste made with fenugreek seed and—"

I raised my hand to cut him off. "Herbert, tell me what's on your mind. There's a self-imposed edition deadline to meet here and hell to pay if I don't."

My demand appeared to offer him relief. His shoulders relaxed and he slumped forward. "It's about Wallace Kilcannon and Rachel Wall. I saw them together the night—the last night she was alive."

"You've told Al Blue about this, right?"

"I thought I should tell you first being that Wallace is your best friend. You understand him better than anyone in this town," he said. Avoiding eye contact, he fussed with his soda jerk cap again, wringing it in one direction and then another as if squeezing water from a washrag.

The narration I offer is Herbert's story as I recall it—years after the resolution of the events of that summer. He recounted the story an inestimable number of times to the authorities and one last time at the trial, but because of its freshness to the event itself, I hold this telling closest to authentic.

Orpha Joiner called Herbert at home around ten-thirty that night—not an altogether unusual occurrence. She was in need of an immediate refill of her nitroglycerin tablets

and waiting for morning was out of the question. If it's an emergency, you should you call Doc Nichols, he told her. No, she said, she didn't want to disturb him. And yet, Herbert thought, but didn't speak the words to Orpha, you can disturb me in the middle of the night. She would be waiting for Herbert at the hotel and he was to make great haste. Well, he told her, he'd have to drive into town, open the shop, and prepare the medication. It would be an hour or so before he could get to her. Orpha would wait. He was to knock on her door three times, pause, then knock two more times—as if she were afraid anyone else might be knocking at her door at midnight. I recall Herbert's toothy smile as he made that editorial comment, an unusually blithe moment I savor to this day.

Herbert passed through the lobby to the stairwell to make his way to Orpha's room on the second floor, puzzled, he added, that Wallace wasn't in his usual place behind the lobby desk. By that time of night, which was close to midnight, all lobby lamps had been extinguished with the exception of a brave little gooseneck lamp on the desk that lit only the guest registry and a set of disembodied hands folded upon it. The hands belonged to Wallace. He sat on

his stool, registry open, ready to greet late night travelers in need of the hotel's shelter. I asked Wallace once if he fell asleep in the darkness when it was so quiet and still. Rufus, he said, it was never quiet that time of night; some of the best visitors come in the dark. But the night Herbert was on his mission of mercy to Orpha Rose, on Rachel Wall's fateful final night, Wallace was not at the lobby desk.

Herbert stopped at the landing when he heard muffled voices coming from the hotel's saloon area. He didn't immediately recognize the voices, but soon discovered they belonged to Wallace and Rachel. Herbert flattened himself against the wall and watched as Rachel backed away from Wallace, one arm outstretched toward him. She told him to leave her alone and that she wasn't interested in anything he had to say. Herbert understood clearly what Wallace said next. It was a sentence that haunted Herbert the rest of his life, a sentence he wished he'd never heard. Wallace told Rachel, "If you go, you will not survive the night."

Rachel responded to Wallace with something that Herbert could not testify to with any certainty. She punctuated her exit from the hotel with a door slam that

should have alerted all in the hotel, asleep, awake, or otherwise. At this point in his original narrative, Herbert paused and pushed his spectacles back to the bridge of his nose. He bit his lower lip, exposing those infamous tombstone teeth.

And Wallace chased right after her into the night, he said.

###

The same night as Herbert's disclosure, Bridey and I stood in the hallway surreptitiously watching from the half open door of Rachel's room at the Caulfield Hotel as Deputy Steve Luehrs pawed through the garments in the open top drawer of the dresser. He stopped when he happened upon a garment that must have appealed to him on his most primal level. Steve held up a pair of black lace panties and studied them for a moment before moving them toward his face when I called out, "Deputy Steve, you are a man of diverse interests."

With all the sangfroid he could assemble in that second of surprise, Deputy Steve tossed the panties back into the drawer and pushed it shut. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

Bridey successfully concealed her laughter with feigned coughing. "Since I'm standing here with camera at the ready, I would guess Al asked me to photograph the room and any evidence collected," I said. "And Bridey is here as official representative of the Caulfield Hotel, isn't that right, little sister?"

"Official," she said, squaring her shoulders and offering Deputy Steve a full palm salute.

"Where's the Sheriff?" Steve said.

"On his way I should think," I answered perhaps a little too pleasantly.

"Don't you two touch anything in here, you understand?" Steve exited the room like a boy caught with his hand down the front of his britches, which metaphorically they were.

"I will never think of black lacy underwear in the same way," I whispered to Bridey.

Never leave anything behind that might incriminate you or your family and remember that every temporary absence may lead to a permanent one. Such was the advice Grand Mae inculcated in my psyche from my earliest sentient years until the advent of my departure for college. Her list of

things one should not leave behind was quite extensive, if not capricious, from the mundane to the sublime: dirty dishes in the sink, soiled laundry—particularly laundry which might lead to speculation regarding personal hygiene—unpaid bills, full waste cans, clandestine letters of love or hate, unmade beds, tailings of faults trifling and significant, unshined shoes, *et cetera, et cetera*. She believed the only evidence we should leave behind is that which reflects a stalwart nature and disposition to good works and deeds.

The sheets and pink chenille spread on Rachel's double bed were mussed, the two feather pillows catawampus at the head. Used tissues, several dog-eared ladies' magazines, three open prescription bottles, an empty lipstick-marked drinking glass, and a square glass ashtray so heaped with cigarette butts that it was a miracle of containment littered the nightstand. The cream colored shade on the nightstand lamp was askew, the fabric along its lower hoop frayed and ripped. Bridey reached toward the lamp.

"I'm not one to support any idea germinated in the baby brain of Deputy Steve, but we best not touch anything," I warned.

"How can anyone live this way?" she said scanning the room in disgust. An assortment of outer and undergarments littered the floor. The denim skirt and gauze blouse Rachel wore when she first stepped off the bus in Wind River were draped over the back of the Morris chair in the corner. Half of a white brassier, its cup and strap held together by a safety pin too large for the task, drooped from the slightly open second dresser drawer. Atop the dresser was a collection of cosmetics, miscellaneous papers from receipts to letters and random notes.

In the corner of the room was a stack of newspapers about two feet high, the top paper was the most recent edition of the *Wind River Tribune*. The headline was "Pioneer Museum Donations Pour In"—which wasn't entirely true since only a handful of citizens had donated for a total of ninety-eight dollars and a pittance of change. Included were a photo of the donated vacant lot where the museum was to be built and a rather crude rendering of the planned building. Under-the-fold headlines were of far greater import outside the glass of the waterglobe that was Wind River: "Thirty-four Dead in Watts Riots" and "U.S. Conducts Major Strikes Against Viet Cong."

The bathroom, barely big enough for the commode, sink, medicine cabinet, and tiny slipper clawfoot tub rivaled the disharmony of the main room. One corner was claimed by a mound of used towels. The sink and tub were ringed with the recrements of use, and the wastebasket brimmed with bathroom detritus, most of which appeared to be used tissues bearing the red mark of blotted lips.

Bridey turned to look curiously at me. "Rachel never wanted me to clean. Fresh towels only." She followed with words tender and wistful. "I could have tidied up for her." Bridey walked from one side of the bed to the other, with exaggerated steps over pieces of clothing lying here and there. "Would it be all right if we open the window? The air in here is so—I don't know-it's—"

"Inert," I said. "I had the same sensation the first time I entered Grand Mae's room after news of her death. There was something so still and eerie about the room. Not frightening—just spiritless. I suppose knowing Grand Mae would never sleep in the bed again, or comb her hair at the dressing table, or spread the curtains to greet her day."

"But she was your grandmother. Rachel Wall was a stranger to us," Bridey said. "It's so sad not to have someone mourn for her."

"I believe you're mourning her right now," I said.

With some difficulty I managed to raise the lower pane of the room's lone window, and like a vaudeville tumbling act waiting in the wings until the curtain cue, a rush of that meddlesome Wind River wind swooshed through the window, teasing the voile curtains into a tango toward the middle of the room while simultaneously disturbing the mess on the dresser. Apparently dissatisfied with the first effort, another miniature tempest made an entrance and hit the dresser square on. Loose papers scattered about the room. Bridey scrambled to gather up the papers and commenced to return them to the dresser when she froze in a moment of surprise.

Uncovered when the papers were blown from the dresser was a scallop-edged black and white photograph. Bridey picked it up and cradled it for the briefest of moments before her hand started to tremble. Without making eye contact, she extended the photograph in my direction.

Two smiling, darkly handsome teenaged boys sat on the front wooden stairs of what appeared to be a schoolhouse. They were wearing dark trousers and white dress shirts open at the collar. The older of the two sat several steps above the younger, his arm casually resting on the young one's shoulder. The younger boy was holding up a prize ribbon of some sort. There was no mistaking who the boys were.

"What was she doing with that?" Bridey demanded.

"Perhaps Cal or Wallace gave it to her," I speculated. "Or perhaps she stole it."

"I've never seen that photograph before, Rufus."

I caught the sound of footfalls and squeaking floorboards from the stairway, causing me, in a moment of ill-considered action, to slip the photograph into my back pocket. "I promise you I shall find out," I whispered and held my finger to my lips.

Al Blue greeted us with his usual deference, inquiring specifically as to how Bridey was faring. In return she offered a slender smile and nod. "Well, we best get to this. You take any photos, Rufus?" he asked.

I was certain Al could see my heart bounce against my chest as I stood staring at him. He pointed to the camera

hanging at the end of my arm. "Oh," I said relieved.

"Thought it best to wait for you."

"This exactly as you found the room?"

I shook my head. "We opened the window for some air, which troubled with the loose items on the dresser, but beyond that it's just as we found it," I said.

"Where's Dave?"

"He was here for a bit then disappeared like a shallow desert pool," I said.

Al glanced at Bridey inquisitively. "Was her room always in this condition?"

"I don't know. She didn't want me to clean her room," Bridey answered softly.

"So this is the first time since Miss Wall moved in nearly four months ago that you've been in this room?" he asked. And suddenly the uncomfortably inert atmosphere of the room was turning enticingly febrile.

"Clean towels and linen only," Bridey said. "Left at the door."

"In all the time she was here you never came in once to change the bed linen, vacuum, or empty the wastebaskets?" Al's question was layered with a film of

anger and incredulity that dispatched as a challenge—a challenge that I knew would brush against the Kilcannon grain.

With narrowed eyes and tightened jaw Bridey's response suggested her umbrage at the veiled accusation. "You mean like a good little hotel maid should?"

She was out of the room before Al could gather a thought or a breath. He looked like a man who'd had a rail spike driven through his forehead. "What'd I do?" he asked.

Stalling in my response to allow Sheriff Blue to simmer a minute in his own stupid stew, I set to work taking photos—the bed, the cluttered floor, the nightstand—the panorama that was Rachel Wall's hotel room would soon be dripping dry in my dark room. Finally I said, "I've had experience with women of all shapes, sizes, ages, colors, and political and religious persuasions. And if I've learned one thing from those many glorious liaisons it is that a woman will never fail to surprise."

"How is that useful to me, Rufus?"

"Just be aware that with the fairer sex, you can't possibly predict—well, a damn thing." I continued shooting

in the bathroom, calling out, "You looking for anything in particular, Sheriff?"

"A purse. And I can pretty well predict we're not going to find it here." Al stood mannequin still in the middle of the room, his eyes fixed on me. To the uninitiated, it may have appeared that Al was studying my photographic technique, but I knew better. It was a posture and look I learned to read when he was a greenhorn deputy weighing whether information he held was suitable and legal to share. "Rachel Wall's toxicology report came in," he finally said.

"Revelations?" I asked.

"Trace amounts of potassium oxalate," he said.

Al had my complete attention. "Potassium oxalate can be fatal if ingested," I said. "Well, in Rachel's case that would be stating the obvious. Was it the cause of death?"

"Contributed to it."

"A fail-safe technique for murder. If plan A doesn't yield satisfactory results, go with plan B," I said.

Al moved to the window and gingerly separated the curtains. He bent over with his hands resting on the window sill. "What does that tell you about the perpetrator?"

After mulling his question for a minute I said, "That this was a premeditated act. That whoever did the deed lacked confidence in the success of either method alone. And that this was an act of revenge."

Al turned toward me. "What makes you think revenge?" he asked. "Why not an act of passion?"

"Correct me if I'm laboring under a false assumption, but I would think passion and premeditation are not mutually inclusive. And revenge because Rachel Wall had the sort of personality that would engender revenge whether on a grand or modest scale."

"You didn't have a very high opinion of the woman, did you, Rufus?" he said.

"It doesn't take a genius to spot an elk in a flock of sheep, Sheriff," I answered.

"Potassium oxalate is used in photography, isn't that right?"

"It's a reducer used to remove silver from negatives and prints and to play with contrast in an emulsion," I said.

"You have some in your darkroom?"

"I do."

"I'll be getting a warrant then," he said.

"Of course," I responded.

We didn't exchange another word as I finished with the last photos Al wanted. Whoever killed Rachel Wall had access to potassium oxalate, and if convenience played any part in the planning of her murder, that meant the potassium oxalate in the *Tribune* darkroom. The closest professional photographer was thirty miles away. Of course, someone knowledgeable of such toxic compounds could order it through a photography catalogue. Al would want to verify who had access to the *Tribune* darkroom. I believe he knew as well as I that the number of people who could gain entry to the darkroom included just about everyone in Wind River. The real question was who was savvy enough to know the poisonous character of the compound and how to administer it.

Chapter Eleven

Rachel had been dead for one week when Wallace sat in Winona's sidecar, his aviator cap and goggles snug on his head, errant strands of his dark hair wind-plastered against the edge of the cap like tiny cracks on an earthenware bowl. Unlike most passengers who dared the ride and gripped the sides of the car so fiercely that I feared permanent damage to the metal, Wallace always appeared completely at ease, his hands resting comfortably in his lap, and even the suggestion of pleasure at the corners of his mouth. We were Don Quixote and Sancho Panza aboard Rocinante and Donkey, leaning into curves and tilting forward slightly on grade.

I opened dear old Winona up to just under sixty-five as we wended our way toward Man in the Tree Mountain, shortened to Mitt Mountain by locals. Our occasional treks to Mitt were the farthest from Wind River either of us cared to venture. This was a fine August evening with oddly mild temperatures and a new moon night sky, perfect conditions for the Perseid Meteor Shower.

Mitt Mountain is seven hundred feet in altitude, but its prominence is only about three hundred feet when one takes into consideration the subtle rise of surrounding terrain. Ten miles north of Wind River, it was an ideal place to gaze skyward with little interference from little city lights. Man in the Tree Mountain earned its designation from skeletal remains found atop the mountain's meadow crest on a roughhewn plank platform in a trifurcated tree trunk by some of the first adventurers to pass through the region in the early 1800s. They were most likely mountain men or free trappers who predated the township of Wind River by decades, not to mention covered wagons laden with pilgrims and their limited possessions.

Mitt's remains were buried at the base of the tree and marked with a cross fashioned from the platform planks. Whoever took time from their journey to bury what was left of the fellow had the foresight to leave a detailed message carved into one of the planks as to the disposition of the deceased upon discovery. That message became the stuff of legend. Speculation spawned fabrication as to cause of death, Mitt's ethnicity and gender, the magical qualities of the misplaced or purloined plank, magical qualities of

the long-buried bones, and Mitt's motivation to be up a tree in the first place gave the story fabulous status and the mountain itself a sprinkling of superstition.

According to the legend of the plank, Mitt's remains were loosely contained within the garb of an Indian female. But adding a layer of intrigue and some confusion were a warrior's accoutrements of war-bow, quiver and arrows, a long tomahawk, and a war shield—found on either side of the remains. I'd like to believe that Mitt was a *berdache*, honored as a female Indian adopting the role of a male, or a male adopting the role of a female, giving blessing to the township that would flourish just beyond the mountain.

When Wind River had sufficient citizenry to plat ground for its dead, the remains were moved to Cottonwood Cemetery with proper granite head and foot stones, maintained by the Howell family for generations since it butted up against their family plot. Mitt's upkeep along with the graves of a dozen or so Howells had fallen to the last in the family line, Cledamae, who had in her later years become sporadic with her cemetery care, putting wild redroot pigweed, rye, goose, and crab grasses in direct competition with the manicured grass carpeting the

departed. The storied plank, if indeed it existed at all, went missing decades earlier.

The most curious aspect of the story, and need I remind it is a chronicle unsubstantiated by any existing written record, is that Mitt's skeleton, nested in the attire of an Indian maiden, was intact. Two hundred and six bones apparently accounted for, highly unusual considering the number of skillful feathered and furred scavengers whose job was to pick clean a carcass and scatter the bones hither and yon.

A local legend held that the clearing at the top of Mitt Mountain was haunted by none other than the tree dweller him or herself, roaming the mountain in a futile search for the warrior's weapons left behind, and which were likely requisitioned by those who first happened upon the remains. As spooky legends go, Mitt was a bush-leaguer, lacking the quality or sophistication to raise gooseflesh or bring on anybody's bejabbers. Wallace assured me on our first visit years before that there was nothing untoward about the mountain and that we could sky gaze to our hearts' content without fear of interruption.

Until that August night.

We reached the top of Mitt as the sun slipped below the horizon. There at the highest point of the mountain in an open meadow in veiling darkness we were bounded by evergreen trees, pale blue phlox, yellow lupine, lavender asters, and buckwheat blossoms. The meadow was our Elysian Field. We may not have been favored by the gods or wearing the mantles of heroes, but Wallace and I were fine companions in most agreeable bucolic surroundings. We spread our blankets on the grass and set out snacks and beer for the evening. Wallace devoured his sandwich with rare rapidity, washing it down with half a bottle of beer.

"You must be particularly famished tonight," I said.

"I wanted to eat before he arrives," Wallace announced as he positioned himself flat on his back, one hand cupped behind his head, the other held a thumb operated tally counter.

"He who?" I asked scanning the dark forested perimeter of the clearing. "Certainly not Mitt."

Wallace pointed skyward with his counter hand and recorded his first meteor. "Not Mitt," he said. Click. And another click and another. And so it went for several hours. Silent except for my occasional *oh* or *ah*, and the

steady clicking of Wallace's counter as Earth moved through Comet Swift-Tuttle's meteor stream hailing the watching world with brilliant streaks dozens of times every hour.

In the distance below us the hamlet of Wind River, shining in the depthless dark like a glimmering sphere of fireflies, gave me a sense of amusing comfort. "Our little town is beautiful from up here," I murmured.

"Beautiful," Wallace echoed.

Less keen on viewing and counting meteors and lulled by the natural complements of cricket chirping, tree frog croaking, and Wallace clicking, I dozed off. I must have been fully asleep for only moments before Wallace announced, "Here he comes, Rufus."

I bolted upright. "Mitt?" I asked from my dormant derangement. A steady single circle of light grew larger as it advanced toward us from the direction of the forest service road. "Who the hell is that?" I whispered. Wallace continued to click his counter.

"Sheriff Blue," Al and Wallace announced in unison, Wallace's words in my left ear as a whisper and Al's a distant call in the right. Al turned the beam toward his face for confirmation, an unnatural sight indeed; a

familiar human head disembodied and floating toward us in the dark. Al stood at the edge of Wallace's blanket, his flashlight beam aimed toward the ground. With the exception of his tie and eight-point cap, Al wore his uniform and full duty gear, his .38 Special snuggled in its hip holster. "Great night for shooting stars," Al said.

"Meteors, Sheriff. Not stars," Wallace said casually.

"What brings you up here, Al?" I said.

"Got a call about some activity on the forest service road. You fellas see or hear anything out of the ordinary tonight?"

"Don't think so," I said. "Wallace?"

"No." Click. Pause. Click.

"Where are those rascally Bodine Brothers this moonless night?" I said.

Al laughed dismissively. "The Bodines aren't responsible for every crime committed in this county."

"Which suggests you have eliminated the boys from any culpability in the death of Rachel Wall?" I didn't expect an answer from Al, nor did I get one. He sat on the edge of Wallace's blanket, removed his cap, and tilted his head skyward, holding silent for perhaps ten minutes. Aesop's

three frog princes sitting atop lily pads waiting for Jove to deliver our king.

There was little doubt in my mind as to our good sheriff's motive. I figured the only activity on the forest service road that night was two odd fellows on a motorcycle trailing dust to the top of a mountain sketchy with superstition. By my estimation Herbert Woodcock would have unburdened his soul to Al regarding what he witnessed between Wallace and Rachel in the hotel lobby the night of her death. Al admitted long after our meeting on Mitt Mountain that his concern that Wallace would fret over an impending interview compelled him to follow us up Mitt, hanging back for several hours before approaching. Al wanted his questioning of Wallace to appear spontaneous and informal. He had no way of knowing our prophetic friend was expecting him all along.

Once again I became the objective observer and dissolved into the background of our story.

"Wallace," Al said. "As long as I'm here, I'd like to ask you some questions about Rachel Wall."

"I'm up to seventy-five." Another click. "Seventy-six," Wallace announced.

"Did you know her very well?" Al asked.

"I can't be sure," Wallace said. "Some people we know for a very short time, but it feels like we've never not known them. Isn't that right, Sheriff?"

"I suppose," Al answered.

"You feel that way about Bridey," Wallace said softly.

There was a thick and dangerous silence before Al continued. "Did you like Rachel?"

"I tried to warn her."

"About?" Al asked.

Fear thrust its jackbooted heel right in my gut. I knew Wallace, a troubadour of honesty, was going to dive off the cliff of incrimination.

"That she would die if she left the hotel. She wouldn't listen."

"How'd you know she'd die?"

"My folks told me I should protect her the best I could."

Al offered a slow noncommittal nod, suggesting a lack of surprise wrapped around a lack of understanding. He was silent through a half dozen of Wallace's clicks before he asked, "Your folks have passed on, right?"

"How different all our lives would be if they had lived," Wallace said.

Al sighed audibly. "How so?"

More clicks in rapid succession. "We wouldn't be here now, would we?" he said and chuckled quietly.

"Did Rachel strike you as the kind of woman who needed protection?"

"We all need protection," Wallace whispered.

Al pulled himself standing and paced, the seductive squeak of his duty gear leather marking cadence as he moved back and forth in front of Wallace lying flat. Al stopped and gazed skyward once again. "Did you know Rachel Wall before she came to Wind River?"

"Do you believe I should have?" Wallace asked with genuine interest.

"Perhaps."

Wallace continued counting and clicking. Wallace's answer was slow in coming. "I can't be sure," he said. "There's something familiar about all people I meet. I can't help that."

Wallace shared his overwhelming reluctance toward approaching her. He didn't know why. It wasn't that Rachel

had been unkind or rude to him. He wasn't sure she had been anything at all to him beyond a guest he'd pass in the hallway or see from across the lobby. And yet when he'd cast quick glances in her direction, she'd respond with a smile and wink framed in a familiarity that caused him minor discomfort. When she came close to him, he would inhale deeply; hoping to catch a fragrance that might rattle his recollection. Nothing came to him but the *delicate, clinging fragrance* of Lux Toilet Soap.

"And then I couldn't help myself," Wallace told Al with rare enthusiasm. "I'd think about Dorothy Lamour and her Lux Toilet Soap magazine advertisements. Remember, Sheriff, Miss Lamour sits on the edge of a bathtub with a towel wrapped around her. You couldn't see anything, of course, but her bare legs and feet, and one shoulder where the towel has slipped a bit. She's holding a bar of Lux Soap. *A Lux Toilet Soap beauty bath is the best way I know to insure daintiness.* I saw the ads in my mother's *Ladies Home Journal* magazines," Wallace said.

"I don't believe I've ever read a *Ladies Home Journal*," Al said.

Click. Click. "Every time I tried to think what it was about Rachel Wall, Dorothy Lamour would walk in and sit on the edge of her bathtub talking about daintiness being a charm that always wins." Click. "D-a-i-n-t-i-n-e-s-s," Wallace spelled aloud.

That night, the exceptional night which Rachel eventually came to own for all time in Wind River, Wallace sat on his stool behind the lobby desk, his hands folded within the circle of warmth from the gooseneck lamp. As Rachel passed she tapped a wordless greeting with four fingers at the edge of his circle of light—one, two, three, four taps in rapid succession.

Francis and Mary had been urging Wallace to warn Rachel of the danger awaiting her. The power to alter anyone's fate could be disturbing for Wallace, but the only choice he had was to follow her into the hotel's saloon.

"The saloon is closed," Wallace whispered.

"Cal said I could help myself to a drink whenever the mood struck me," Rachel said.

"I don't believe you."

Rachel continued her journey to the back bar scrutinizing several liquor bottles. "What you believe is of little consequence to me anymore, Wallace," she said.

He was thoughtful for a moment before he asked, "Was it ever?"

Apparently deciding against a drink, Rachel came out from behind the bar, brushing against Wallace's back as she passed behind him. "Was it ever," she purred and moved toward the lobby.

Wallace followed; he grabbed her wrist but let go immediately. "If you go, you won't survive the night," he said. He had to look away and hold his breath as he told Al and me the story. I'm sure he feared Dorothy Lamour would appear in front of him.

Rachel backed away from him with one arm outstretched as if fending him off. "Leave me alone. I'm not the least bit interested in anything you have to say," she said.

"She left the hotel then?" Al asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Click. "Yes."

"Did you follow her?"

Click. Click. "After I locked up. It was just after midnight."

"Why did you follow her?"

"We all need protection."

"Where'd she go?"

"To the alley by the courthouse. She got in the passenger side of a car and it left the alley headed east."

"Did you recognize the car?" Al unfolded his arms and absently rested one hand on his holstered pistol.

"I don't know cars, Sheriff. Besides, the alley was dark."

"Did the dome light go on when the passenger door opened?"

"It did."

"Did that illuminate anything for you? Like who may have been behind the wheel?"

"The driver was slumped down in the seat. I saw only the top of his head—or her head."

"Did you find Rachel attractive, Wallace?" Al asked.

There was a loaded silence with no counter clicking. Finally Wallace said, "You're asking if I wanted to have relations with her, and the answer is no."

"Did you go back to the hotel after the car left the alley?"

Click. "No."

"Well, Wallace, where did you go?"

Click. Click. Click. "To have relations with Delight Daggett."

###

Mysterious Lights in the Sky Over Mitt Mtn

Thursday November 19, 1896

(From the Wind River Tribune Archives)

A strange lighted aerial object appeared over Mitt Mountain on Tuesday night of this week. The luminescent object was sighted around 10 o'clock by a large number of Wind River citizens attending Virgil Caulfield's birthday celebration at the Caulfield Hotel. Celebrants moved from the lobby to the porch and front lawn of the hotel to watch fireworks commissioned to celebrate Mr. Caulfield's birthday.

Reports indicate the enormous spherical object hung over Mitt Mountain for forty-five minutes. It displayed lights at its bottom, shifting from red to blue to white. The object began to rock back and forth and then darted

east to west over the mountain in the blink of an eye. The object shot up and out of sight with amazing speed.

There is no explanation for the object. However, Havers Truax, Wind River high school teacher and amateur astronomer, believes people were seeing the planet Venus or the star Alpha Orionis in the Orion Constellation. He also suggested the object may have been a bolide, which is an exploding meteor. Mr. Truax did not see the object firsthand, but felt confident what people saw was a perfectly natural phenomenon and posed no threat to the residents of Wind River.

Chapter Twelve

I was tinkering with advertisement copy to accompany the photo of a new fertilizer product available at the Farm and Feed, when Cal Kilcannon, eyes afire, fists clenched, mouth taugt burst into the *Tribune* office about midday a week following our visit to Mitt Mountain. "Where's the Scoffone kid?" he demanded.

The worst pummeling I ever witnessed was at the Chicago Stadium on a sweltering day in July 1947, when Rocky Graziano bent Tony Zale over the ropes with a fusillade of punches in the sixth round of their championship fight. I came to possess a ringside seat in an endless poker game the night before the bout in a crummy Lower West Side Chicago hotel room with some world-class crummy poker players with tells as obvious as the wrinkles on a Shar-Pei pup. I would have scalped the ticket had I known I'd be sitting in direct line of fire of the spittle, sweat, and blood of both boxers, not to mention the high level of annoyance experienced as I sat bodkin between two ruffians who subjected me to derisive head patting and raucous laughter. Any attempt to escape their reverie was

met with a firm yank on the scruff of my neck. I assumed the two were associates of the ticket loser who were suffering from severe righteous indignation as they double-teamed the top of my head as if it were a basketball.

"Not here," I told Cal.

"When?" Cal leaned over my desk, knuckles flat against the fertilizer packaging photo. "When's he coming in?"

"Well, I can't be absolutely sure. He doesn't punch a time clock. If he has photos to develop..." I pried the fertilizer photo from beneath Cal's knuckles.

"The pictures he took of Bridey were on the lobby desk this morning." Cal was standing upright now, looking menacing in his cloak of fury.

I nodded my awareness. I had found the photos the night before as they dripped dry in the darkroom. The photos were rather artful, and were it not for the fact they revealed the young woman I had known since she was a toddler, I would have lingered longer with them. Harvey certainly didn't expect anyone to discover them as they dried. Or perhaps he did.

"How many other people have seen them?" Cal asked.

I shook my head. "How would I know that?"

"Who left them on the lobby desk, for chrissake? And how many other people have seen them?" he repeated.

I stood and stepped to the front of the desk, standing at my arm's length from Cal. "I told you I don't know." I then performed one of tricks Grand Mae taught me about negotiating. I made my statement, stood tall with my arms at my sides, and stared straight up into Cal's eyes. *The trick, Rufus, she said is to remain silent from the time you state your position and never—she folded her arms over her generous chest then dropped them to her sides—adopt a defensive posture. Silence is as effective an antidote for anger as garlic is to black henbane.* Grand Mae always added that *it was a pity Hamlet's father wasn't snacking on a clove of garlic when Claudius delivered the fatal dose of that leperous distilment.*

I felt Cal's wrath against my forehead with volatile bursts of exhaled anger. He took a step backwards then moved toward the darkroom. He opened the door and peered in. "Did you speak with that piece of shit about the photos," he said.

"I haven't seen that specific piece of shit since yesterday morning. And how can we be certain he was behind

the camera in the first place?" That caught me off guard since it was wholly unlike me to break the ground of doubt; I had assumed from the moment of discovery of the soft porn photos of Bridey, that Harvey Scoffone had his fingers on the focusing ring of the camera and hopefully little else.

Harvey strode through the open *Tribune* doors as cocky as a cowpoke into a saloon after a long cattle drive. Before Harvey could give thought to turning tail, Cal had him pinned against a wall, delivering a close range upper cut to his solar plexus. I heard an explosion of forced air from the lungs of the much younger and smaller Harvey. Then a right cross to the nose and the sickening crunch of shattering bone followed by a second right cross to Harvey's temple. Harvey bent forward and put both arms around Cal's waist, burying his head into Cal's chest and pushing him backwards. Cal managed to stay upright, but Harvey didn't. He swept the boy from the floor by his belt and forced him against the wall once again; Harvey left a stream of vomit in flight.

In just under two minutes from the time he crossed into the office from the street, Harvey was bleeding profusely from his eye, nose, and mouth, and was barely

conscious. In one of my spur of the moment actions, which I tried to avoid at all cost, I insinuated myself between the two. Granted, by then Cal's better angel was having sway or else he was exhausted by his exertion. Harvey slumped to the floor.

"Jesus H. Christ, Cal. That's enough," I yelled.

Cal backed away, cradling his right hand in his left. "You tell the sonuvabitch I'm pressing charges." Cal gasped and winced simultaneously.

"And you don't think he will? Get the fuck out of here."

Moments after he reduced Zale to a bloody bundle of humanity basted in body fluids, Graziano danced in the ring, bathed in the silvery illumination from the overhead stadium light and holding heavenward the satin belt with its gold-plated shields of the middleweight champion of the world.

The Kilcannon-Scoffone grudge match produced nothing more than a couple of losers.

###

Bridey sobbed quietly in the chair on the civilian side of Al Blue's desk. For his own part, Al appeared as

distraught. If he looked up from the sparse file spread in front of him on the desk, it was to look in my direction in the far corner of his office at the water cooler. The scant file appeared to contain a standard arrest form, a page of typed notes, and several photos turned face down, the edges of which appeared to be casualties of a mutilation effort.

I was experiencing the same feeling of helplessness that vexed me as a child when Pip was abducted. I fumbled with the cooler spigot, delaying having to take my seat once again next to Bridey. The cooler gurgled and the air bubbles rose to the surface of the water and vanished—an existence so beautifully simple and complete.

"You having trouble with the water there, Rufus?" Al asked.

"Not at all. Can I get one for you?"

Al motioned for me to get the water cup to Bridey. She took it and sipped with her head bowed. "I'll have to keep Cal in jail until his arraignment on Monday morning," he said. Al finally looked at Bridey and she at him.

"This never should have happened," she said. "How could I have been so stupid?" she said. "I let Harvey take the photos." Her words were spoken so softly, they were

nearly lost. A silence so heavy I feared it would never lift fell over us. Two men who loved this lovely young woman immeasurably didn't know how to respond to her shame and guilt.

"Now, little sister, this isn't your fault." My reassurance had that brittle banality that jarred even my sensitivities. I went queasy thinking how it may have sounded to Bridey. "Did I ever tell you about the time I was in Zanzibar? You see, I was studying Swahili—this was, of course before the war..."

Al interrupted me. "Bridey, you have to know that if this goes to trial, you'll likely have to testify. If Cal pleads guilty, the judge will sentence him and he'll serve his time."

"How long would that be?" she asked.

"Depends on the judge," Al said. "The fact Harvey's dad is the county prosecutor will not work in Cal's favor."

"How's Dad doing?" she asked. "He isn't hurt, is he?"

"He may have broken his wrist. Doc Nichols is checking him out now."

Bridey looked up, her eyes were red and sorrow swollen. "Can I see him?" she asked.

Al answered, "Rufus, you stay here with Bridey while I make arrangements for the visit."

Again that uncomfortable silence when Cal left. Bridey broke through the stillness with, "Does Wallace know about this?"

"I would guess not or he'd be here," I said.

Bridey turned to look at me, her troubled countenance becoming more so. "You know where he is?"

"Not a clue," I said. "I haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon about this time."

"Shit," we said in unison.

###

My fear that locating Wallace would require Herculean effort was unfounded. He was sitting next to the bed of Orpha Rose Joiner, holding the dead woman's hand.

I was performing a floor-by-floor search of the hotel when I happened by Orpha Rose's slightly open door, that familiar scent of rose toilet water stronger than usual. Wallace didn't take his eyes from her face or release her hand as I stepped into the room. "She died about two hours ago," he said. "She had a great fear of dying alone." Orpha Rose's eyes stared through half-veiling lids; her sparse,

short silver hair sprung from her scalp like kinky wire; and her slacked jaw caused her toothless mouth to yawn open.

"How'd you know?" I asked.

Wallace smiled, held his eyes closed for an impatient moment, and said, "Mother and Dad, of course. They told me to go to her, that she needed someone to ease her passing. She had a stroke."

"Where's Ida?"

"She was mad at Ida," Wallace whispered.

"Orpha Rose was always mad at Ida," I said. "We need to call Ida just the same. I'm sorry Orpha Rose has passed away and all of Wind River will mourn her loss. But right now we have other issues to attend to."

"The photos of Bridey," Wallace said prosaically.

"You've seen them?"

"They were on the lobby desk this morning when I came down to unlock the front door," he said. "Cal came along just as I began to tear them apart."

"Well, they've curdled the sunshine of this day," I said.

"I've seen photographs of Orpha Rose when she was younger," Wallace paused and looked at me. "She was beautiful."

"I'm sure she was, but I need you to focus here. Your brother beat the shit out of the Scoffone kid, who left a deposit of bodily fluids in my office which have no doubt dried to concrete by now and will be hell to clean. Cal's in the hoosegow charged with assault, not to mention experiencing great pain from a broken wrist. Our Bridey is reduced to a quivering, crying mass of regret and guilt..." I halted in my litany of Kilcannon woe as I stared at the dead Orpha Rose. A narcissistic shiver slithered down my spine. "And, Wallace, promise me if you're the one sent to my deathbed that you'll weigh down my eyelids and secure my jaw closed. Jesus, she looks like shit."

"She hasn't quite left yet, Rufus. She's right up there," he said nodding toward the ceiling in a corner of the room.

"I meant no disrespect," I said looking in the same general area but seeing nothing save the eventide shadow of the setting sun playing against the wall.

###

Cal Kilcannon Sentenced

Saturday, September 4, 1965

Wind River, Washington

Long-time Wind River resident Cal Kilcannon was sentenced Wednesday by Judge Paul Ryan to six month's probation on the charge of simple battery against Harvey Scoffone, 19. Kilcannon, a decorated war hero, who is co-owner of the Caulfield Hotel and a friend to many in the community, had no comment about his sentencing. Original aggravated assault charges filed by County Prosecutor Leonard Scoffone, father of the victim, were dropped by Judge Ryan to the lesser charge, citing conflict of interest and Kilcannon's upstanding place in the community. The assault stemmed from an apparent personal misunderstanding between the two men.

Harvey Scoffone was scheduled to report in September to Parris Island, South Carolina, for Marine boot camp. His report date has been advanced to late October to accommodate the time required to recuperate from his minor injuries. Young Scoffone was unavailable for comment.

###

Much to Ida Joiner's dismay, her mother had prearranged her cremation with the stipulation there would be no service of any stripe. Grieved beyond reason and wracked with the guilt of a row unresolved, Ida did her best to override the cremation. There was nothing she could accomplish legally, only managing to prolong the inevitable with the demand of an autopsy. We all found Orpha Rose's desire to have her cremains scattered in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the narrow passage of water between northwest Washington State and Canada's Vancouver Island, to be astonishing. As far as we knew, Orpha Rose had always been a landlubber with, according to Ida, no affinity for oceanscape or previously expressed desires for a burial at sea.

Bridey, Pip, Delight, Wallace, and I lined up on the maple tree shaded sidewalk in front of the Caulfield Hotel to pay our silent respects as Ida drove past in her '60 Twilight Blue Belvedere swimming its way toward Juan de Fuca with its grotesquely large tail fins. Ida would make her way to I-90 and then to Seattle and a ferry to Vancouver, B.C., where, not knowing the laws regulating ash

dispersal at sea, she would subversively execute the deposition.

It was a perfunctory solemn scene with the five of us lined up on the sidewalk on that warming September morning when Orpha Rose left Wind River. We looked like a second-rate vaudeville family act waiting on our cue, all coincidentally clad in white shirts, and beige short, except for Pip, who wore a sleeveless black and white dotted Swiss frock, a black netted pillbox hat, white wrist-length gloves, and a rectangular black patent leather handbag with a silver rectangular clasp hung from her bent arm. A wind darted hither and thither through the branches of the maples offering up a soothing susurrus as it played quick and gentle with the leaves.

"Do you think we'll be burying Rachel Wall soon?" Bridey asked.

"Where did that come from?" I asked.

"It's sad to think of someone we knew..."

"Barely knew," Delight slipped in.

Bridey continued, "...Barely knew just waiting for her last page to turn."

"That's a lovely metaphor, dear," Pip said.

"Autopsy's as complete as it's going to be," I said. "If Al can't locate next of kin pretty soon, we'll see that she has a proper funeral."

"Seems like that's all we've been doing around here lately, burying folks," Delight said with uncommon somberness. "You'd think Wind River had some kind of curse or hex or something."

"I don't imagine Rachel's as pretty as she was when she first stepped off that bus," Bridey said. "It's too sad."

"And here's sadness approaching from the east," I said. Ida slowed as she passed us, the front passenger window rolled down so we might better see Orpha Rose's cardboard container, not much bigger than a shoebox, settled in the seat.

Delight stood motionless with her arms at her sides. Bridey stood as still, but raised her hand in a slow, regal open-palm wave. Pip had struck what could only be described as a *Ladies Home Journal* cover model pose staring straight on, hands gracefully set at her waist and the heel of her right foot at a close forty-five degree angle to her left. I stood with my hands behind my back and head slightly

bowed, recognizing the sorry condition of my sneakers with both big toes near protrusion through the canvas and once white shoelaces as gray as a stormy dawn.

Wallace, for reasons known only to him, stood at attention holding a most proper regulation salute with his right hand smartly to the corner of his right eye.

As Ida's Belvedere swam out of sight we roughly assembled mourners relaxed and headed into the hotel. "Damn it," Delight said. "I forgot to replace her right taillight." She stared long after Ida's car. "Gave her a free tune-up for the trip though."

"How thoughtful," Pip said, and in nearly the same breath, "Is it too early to raise a glass to the departed?"

"Never too early or too late," I answered.

"Wallace," Bridey announced flatly.

Not until Pip returned to the sidewalk, stood in front of Wallace, and snappily returned his salute did he slowly lower his arm and fall into step behind us.

"Wallace Kilcannon," Deputy Steve Luehrs called from his cruiser as it pulled up to the curb. "Hold on there," he called again.

"What does he want with Wallace?" Bridey snarled.

"Who knows what that peckerwood wants with anything," I said.

"Sheriff wants Wallace over to the office to answer a few questions," Deputy Steve said to no one in particular.

Pip slipped her hand into the crook of Wallace's arm, guiding him toward the hotel. "Have some respect for the occasion, deputy. We're in the midst of mourning our friend. Wallace will be over when we're finished here."

"And exactly when will you be finished? When you're good and ready, I suppose," Steve said, a smirk palpable in his tone.

It's hard to imagine Beatrice Pippin standing any straighter or fixing her shoulders any squarer, but I swear I saw her go as stiff and straight as if a reinforcing steel rod had been rammed down her spine. She was at Deputy Steve's window in the space of a heartbeat. I half expected and half desired her to grab Steve by the short hairs and yank him out the car window onto the sidewalk, jam her black-pump clad foot to his throat, and demand acknowledgement that he is, in fact, a gaping asshole.

Instead she stood on the curb, her gloved hands cradled together ladylike at her waist. "I'm not given to

repeat myself, young man. But in your case, where understanding and sensitivity are well beyond your intellectual and emotional grasp, I shall do exactly that. Wallace will be over when we're finished here. No later and certainly no sooner. Now, you tell me what piece of that you find so difficult to comprehend." Her tone, unwavering as usual, dared him to challenge her.

Steve's response came slowly. "Just make sure he's at the Sheriff's Office ASAP." He stuck his capped head out the window, looking past Pip toward me. "You hear me, Wallace? Rufus?"

Before I could summons a response of adequate pith, Steve had laid down some serious get-away rubber.

"Silly little man," Pip said as she joined us and once again angled her hand into the crook of Wallace's arm.

###

Wallace slipped away as Bridey poured the third round of drinks. We were peeling away the logic of why anyone would want his or her ashes scattered in the ocean or anywhere else for that matter when Wallace, sitting next to me at the bar, touched my shoulder, ran his hand down my upper arm, and left the saloon. At the time it didn't

strike me as being particularly odd; although, we all knew well that Wallace didn't like being touched or touching, unless it was Delight Daggett, who, he said, had a touch so light that she managed to melt into him like soft butter into warm bread.

"I don't even like to think about dying," Bridey announced.

"Then don't," Delight cautioned.

"I think about it occasionally," Pip said. "But then, if the law of averages holds, I'm closer to the end than anyone else here."

I turned to Pip and announced, "You'll outlive us all, darling."

"And what makes you think that?" Pip challenged.

"Tenacious spirit and an indelible stubborn streak that allows life on your terms alone," was my slightly tipsy response.

Alabaster Blue's reflection in the back bar mirror caught me off guard. The reflection grew bigger as the real Al approached. He stood behind and between Pip and me. "Where's Wallace?" he asked in an unusually brusque manner.

I can't know for sure why Bridey was the one who responded or why her words sounded more a summons to action than a simple response to Alabaster Blue. Perhaps she was emboldened by the knowledge an indeterminate number of people had gazed upon black and white images of her mostly nude body and all pretense of her to-date unsullied character had flushed away in the blink of an eye. Perhaps she was drafting off the dauntless hearts and souls of Pip and Delight who cared little for life's trepidation. Perhaps she was simply fed up with Sheriff Blue's interference in the Kilcannon life. "What the hell do you want with Wallace?" she demanded.

Stranded in the middle of a bridge on fire at both ends, Delight, Pip, and I turned to face the real Al Blue, whose careworn face grew more drawn with the disappointment from Bridey's words. Holding his stare on the girl long enough to penetrate to the backyard of her soul he responded with indifference. "I need to ask Wallace a few questions about Orpha Rose's death."

And back to Bridey as she glanced around the saloon and shrugged her shoulders. "Well, he doesn't appear to be here, now does he?"

"I have a warrant to search his room," Sheriff Blue said patting his breast pocket. "I'd appreciate someone coming along as a witness," he added.

"For what?" Bridey spoke the words I'm certain we all were thinking. What in the world could Wallace Kilcannon have in his sparse bedroom that would call for a search warrant?

Pip slipped from her stool, straightened her pillbox hat, slipped her purse over her arm, and moved gracefully toward the lobby. "I'm perhaps the most objective person in this precious gathering. Where's that deputy of yours?"

"Responding to a call out near the Bodine place," Al answered as he fell in behind Pip. The rest of us fell in behind Al.

Pip was in the lobby and nearly to the stairs when she told Al, "That deputy of yours is as repugnant as salt to a slug."

"I'll be sure to give him your regards," Al said stopping and casting a look over his shoulder to us. "I have my witness. Bridey, I'll need a key to his room."

She snapped back, "He never locks his door."

The wallpaper covering Wallace's room was a bit feminine for my taste, pink and red flower sprays on green stripe background. The paper was original to the room, no doubt chosen carefully by Virgil-Virginia herself, and in remarkably good shape considering its age. With the exception of a Philco Tombstone-shaped radio that sat atop a tiny table in a corner by the window, Wallace's room lacked convenience and comfort. He had a mattress on the bare oak hardwood floor and a hairpin-back bentwood chair that listed a bit to the left. An apple box with its corners-peeling label calling out Wenatchee Apples with a personified gleaming red apple sporting a friendly smiling face, a fancy fedora, and a bowtie stood vertically next to the mattress. Neatly stacked in the standing apple box Wallace kept his rotating collection of seven library books—one read for each day of the week, and atop the box a flashlight and a glass of water freshened nightly and protected with wax paper secured with a rubber band around the rim.

Later that evening, nested on my sofa as we cradled our evening bourbon, Pip recounted the details of what transpired during the search of Wallace's room. "Sheriff

Blue scrutinized everything in that room from the underside of the rug to the hind side of the radio. I'm surprised he didn't take the radio apart to examine the tubes. He was very thorough," she said.

"How did he happen upon it?" I asked.

"It was in that tiny closet. Remind me I need to buy Wallace some new clothes."

"He won't wear them. Go on, please," I nudged.

"Hanging on the left side of the closet bar was this tattered indigo jean jacket with a tan corduroy collar..."

"His Stormrider jacket. I gave it to him for Christmas five years ago."

She took a sip of her bourbon and swished it around in her mouth then swallowed hard as if forcing an anvil down her throat. This is what she'd do when she told me stories as a child, prolonging the reveal as long as possible, holding my imagination hostage on the brink of action. It was agonizing for me as a child and no less painful as an adult. I learned, however, to rush her was futile.

"Incidentally, I believe I know who put the photos of Bridey on the lobby desk," she announced.

"The jacket?" I asked gently.

"Sheriff Blue pats each of the items hanging in the closet. A few shirts, a suit, a few jeans. There were some clothes folded on top of the closet shelf. Undergarments, I believe. Well, he comes to the Stormrider jacket and pats it down. And there wedged into one of the sleeves on the opposite side of the door, he finds it." Pip stared gloomily ahead. "A perfect hiding place considering the size of the purse and how few of us regard the inside of a jacket sleeve as warranting any thought at all."

"Was Al surprised?"

"I didn't see his face, but I can tell you his shoulders nearly dropped to the floor in disappointment," she said. Pip took another sip, swish, and swallow. "He pulled the purse out of the jacket sleeve. And he just stood there holding it like it was a brick he was contemplating hurling through a window."

"Rachel's purse?"

"According to the identification inside, yes," she said. "Rather incrementing evidence."

"Your words or Al Blue's?" I asked.

She looked at me with surprise. "Your sheriff is far too bright to have said anything like that in front of a private citizen."

Possession of a purse does not mean Wallace killed Rachel Wall. I was certain there could have been any number of explanations for it being in his possession, though only two stepped forward. Perhaps he found it and slipped it down the sleeve for safekeeping with every intention of returning it to Rachel or turning it over to Al. But the most obvious explanation and the one that squared perfectly was that the purse was planted. "Do you think whoever put the photos of Bridey on the lobby desk also planted the purse in Wallace's room?" I asked.

"No," she said with a dismissive chuckle.

"Please," I said. "Enlighten me. Who put the photos on the desk?"

"Well, Rufus. You did, of course."

###

I had been locking the front doors of the *Tribune* office since Rachel's murder, but Delight Dagget, Wallace, and Bridey, along with probably every other citizen of Wind River with a modicum of observational skill and at least

one functioning eye, knew where I kept the key hidden. It was not unusual for Delight to find her way to my bed in the late night or early morning hours when she was battling insomnia or her transient, albeit overwhelming, loneliness. That night she quietly slipped into bed, curving her body into mine. She wrapped her arm around my middle, found my hand and laced our fingers together.

I could feel the buttons of her shirt pressing into my bare backside, indicating that Delight was almost certainly fully clothed and that the intimacy of her visit was apt to be more intellectual than carnal. "I'm scared," she whispered in my ear.

Her warm breath dancing near my ear distracted my thoughts for a satisfying moment. I squeezed her hand. "Tell me what scares you, my darling."

"That I'll grow old and fade away without anyone to care. I don't want to be found dead underneath some old beater, trying to coax life back into an engine that hasn't the will to go on. Oil dripping onto my dead face, into my eyes, and mouth. I don't want that to happen," she said. And as if it were even possible, she pulled closer into me.

"I can promise you that will never happen," I said. An easy silence wafted over us as I tried to match the pumping of my heart to hers.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked finally.

"Because I will be there to yank your dead body out from beneath the car before the oil starts dripping." She kissed my shoulder, letting her moist lips linger for a moment against my skin. Shortly she drifted off to sleep, her soft snoring as reassuring as the purr of a kitten content.

I was fully awake by then, wondering who the hell was going to yank my dead head off of my Royal Arrow typewriter, forehead smudged with black ink from the fabric ribbon, fingers rigid around the carriage return lever, the typebars eternally entangled from the dead weight of my head plopping on the keys. I gentled from Delight's grasp as discreetly as possible, pulled on my pants and slid down the firemen's pole into the newspaper office. The night's natural illumination mixing with the dim light from the nearest streetlamp encroached upon the office through the windows, casting the office in a cool grey that allowed sufficient light to move about.

The rhythm of night in Wind River is like any other small town, banal silence penetrated by the occasional muffled human voice, the whirr of a passing automobile, or, as on that night, the preternatural echo of the wild that shocks a man's primal fear awake.

The high, quavering howl of the coyote sounded as if it were right at my door. I peered out the front window to capture an unshakeable image. The coyote stood on all fours. Though the lamp high above the door threw only a weak filtered light because of the accumulation of countless bug carcasses pooled in the bottom of its globe, the creature was as vivid and brilliant as if he were beneath a Klieg light on a sound stage. He appeared unusually large at perhaps thirty pounds, with fresh dark champagne fur from summer molt, pointy ears, and those narrow, satanic eyes. He howled again more drawn out, and then followed up with those damnable short, high-pitched taunting yips that, I would suppose, send a chill through even the most seasoned hunter. I foolishly made a shooing sound and a dismissive gesture through the window. He howled again.

I entertained a fleeting thought of fetching Father's pistol from my closet, but didn't want to disturb Delight if she had managed to sleep through the coyote's clarion call. Perhaps for lasting proof I made the decision to shoot a photo of the beast rather than shoot him between the eyes. A coyote howling at a newspaper office door is aberrant behavior in anyone's catalogue.

As I made my way toward the desk, I stubbed my bare little piggy toe on the captain's chair, emitting a torrent of muffled cursing that surely rivaled the predator baying at the door. The camera was not in the lower drawer where it was usually kept, but since Harvey Scoffone was photographer-in-residence, I assumed he'd left it in the darkroom.

All thought of the coyote dissolved the second I opened the darkroom and I saw six photos of Bridey hanging from the drying line. Like a snake preparing to strike my anger coiled around my gut and made its way to the top of my head in an instant. I ripped the photos from the line and threw them to the floor. An immediate and thorough search of the darkroom for the negatives turned up nothing.

The son-of-a-bitch Harvey Scoffone had taken advantage of our little girl.

I tucked the photos in my desk drawer, poured a whiskey from my desk flask and thought intently as to what I should do. It was several hours before dawn and the coyote had long since left. It struck me at that moment the coyote may have been Mitt come down from his mountain transformed as a prairie predator to tease me into the darkroom. Had I imagined the coyote? Had I imagined Delight?

###

As I recounted the story Pip had finished her bourbon and poured an additional finger. "How did you know?" I asked.

"It was what you didn't say, that clued me in," she answered. "You've been favoring your right foot for some time now. Since you weren't complaining or offering any explanation, I allowed as how you had injured your foot or toe doing something you shouldn't have." Pip knew me far too well. Rarely could I let a malady or injury go unacknowledged.

Her head resting now against the back of the sofa, she continued. "You and Harvey were the only ones with easy access to the darkroom. You were appalled at the photographs and felt the boy should be punished for his participation. Teach him a lesson, you thought."

"I took the photos to the hotel and left them on the desk," I admitted without contrition.

"How did you access the locked hotel in the middle of the night?" she asked.

"Wallace and I hid the key ourselves years ago behind a loose corner brick about three feet from the ground on the western side. I knew Wallace would see the photos first thing in the morning and that he would be compelled to show them to Cal. I was back in bed before Delight woke up or dawn broke."

"You used Cal to exact your revenge."

"He would want to own a piece of it," I said. I looked long at my Aunt Pip, my protector, my mentor. It occurred to me that she might suspect more than she was letting on. "You don't think for a minute I had anything to do with Rachel Wall's murder?"

"You are capable of anything you set your mind to, Rufus Dandee. But never murder." Pip downed the last of her bourbon and stood to leave. She stared down at me and smiled. "I know something of revenge," she announced, her voice somewhat gravelly from the drink and late hour. "And you must know that it is a rusty nail which will find its way into the sole of your foot eventually," she paused. "Perhaps it has already."

###

Wallace Kilcannon Arrested on Murder Charges

Friday, September 17, 1965

Wind River, Washington

Wallace Kilcannon was arrested yesterday in the death of Rachel Wall. Kilcannon, 37, was taken into custody without incident yesterday. County Prosecutor Leonard Scoffone said he will bring first degree murder charges against Kilcannon.

Rachel Wall's body was discovered on the shore at Stump Beach on August 18. She had been strangled. Scoffone said eye witnesses put Kilcannon with Miss Wall late the evening she was killed. Miss Wall's purse was found in Kilcannon's room at the Caulfield Hotel.

There is a groundswell of disbelief that Wallace Kilcannon had anything to do with Miss Wall's death.

Chapter Thirteen

Murdered Woman to Rest at Cottonwood

Wednesday, September 29, 1965

Wind River, Washington

Six weeks following discovery of her body at Stump Beach, Rachel Wall will be buried at 6:00 PM tomorrow at Cottonwood Cemetery. She will be interred in Section Five, near the China Rose bushes planted last year by the First Presbyterian Church Ladies Auxiliary.

Miss Wall, 35, arrived in Wind River in early June. She had been a receptionist in the office of County Prosecutor Leonard Scoffone. Miss Wall was a resident of the Caulfield Hotel.

Despite attempts by Sheriff Alabaster Blue and County Clerk Martin O'Neill, no relatives of the woman have been located.

###

Since neither of the two Wind River clergymen was available, I felt it incumbent upon me to say a few words at Rachel's burial. Though she clearly held me in great disdain, I was the first Wind Riverian she encountered

after stepping off the Greyhound bus. Such a dubious honor didn't necessarily give me license to eulogize or condemn an individual who had passed, but someone had to do it. I couldn't possibly just let the woman be buried without some kind of sendoff. Pip declined the invitation to accompany me, insisting that if Wind Riverians were making last good-byes into a hobby, she'd best sit this one out to conserve her strength. Delight flatly stated she rather shoot herself in the foot. Cal and Bridey certainly wouldn't be there. Wallace would have been were it not for the simple fact he was in jail, charged with Rachel's murder. It appeared as if no one would show. Nonetheless, I committed to say a few words. It was a pleasant surprise when Ardis Dardanelle, Al Blue, Cledamae Howell, and Herbert Woodcock joined me.

By the time we had gathered, Rachel's unadorned, rope-handled solid pine casket had been lowered into the ground. The cemetery worker, an unkempt and slothful young man of about twenty who called himself Sparky, was poised with the backhoe to replace the extracted earth over the casket when Al issued an official cease and desist order. Sparky left

for a smoke break with a halfhearted promise to return within the hour.

Cledamae was dressed in a man's denim work shirt and Levi jeans—it seems as if she had forsaken her Joaquin Murrieta persona for the time being. She had the business end of a garden trowel sticking out from one back pocket and a pair of seasoned garden gloves finger-flapping out of the other. In a black suit, soft gray shirt, and black tie, Herbert looked more the funeral home director than the soda jerk pharmacist. I believe he may have been smitten by the beautiful Rachel Wall, and since I believe he only had congress with her with a service counter between them, he couldn't know her well enough to wholly dislike her. In light of Ardis's white heat animus toward Rachel, her presence was something of a mystery. She was the last to join our little group, making something of a grand entrance in her perennial form fitting funeral dress and netted pillbox hat. She carried a single red rose.

Long late summer shadows from the cottonwood trees behind us crept over the scene as we five stood around the perimeter of the hole. A pesky warm Wind River wind joined us, dancing through the cottonwoods and zigzagging around

us for a brief time. We held in that uneasy hands-crossed-in-front silence staring down at the humble casket, which, I noticed, was not sitting level on the floor of the hole. The Ladies Auxiliary China Rose bushes were well past their seasonal prime, but still managed a faint sweet fragrance to waft in our direction. The rhythmic bleat of an early evening night hawk bounced around us.

I had an uneasy feeling someone beyond our coterie was watching. Not someone that Wallace and no one else would see, but rather a real, corporeal someone. I glanced over my right shoulder toward the dense cottonwoods and thought I caught movement out of the corner of my eye, but couldn't be sure. Who would want to see Rachel Wall's burial, but not want to be seen?

"We didn't know Rachel Wall well," I began and paused. "We didn't actually know her at all. As a newcomer to Wind River she was still going through that uncomfortable period of adjusting to our community and its citizens. Rachel was a beautiful woman who surely made her mark in Wind River. Unfortunately, someone took her life far too early—and it wasn't Wallace Kilcannon," I said casting a glance at Al. His only response was a squaring of his shoulders and a

slight repositioning of his head. "Would anyone like to add something?" I asked.

With a surprisingly gentle underhanded toss, Ardis sent her single rose down into the grave. It landed squarely atop the casket. She looked thoughtfully at me then down at the casket and said, "I'm sorry she had to die the way she did. No one deserves that. Let nothing be said of the dead but what is good."

I was taken aback by Ardis's near kind words about a woman she held in utter contempt. I don't think it was for show. There was no one there whom she would care to impress. I simply said, "Thank you, Ardis." But I was desperate to know what the hell had burrowed its way into the crust of her conscience.

Herbert Woodcock took a deep audible breath. "It was a pleasure to see her come into the drugstore," he said. He then chanced a broad crooked-toothed grin and added, "She liked my chocolate sodas."

"And Cledamae," I said, "Do you have anything to say?"

Cledamae appeared nonplused. "I was just over doing some weeding at the family plot, and thought I might join you. Who is it that passed?" she asked.

"Rachel Wall. She was Leonard Scoffone's receptionist." I lowered my voice and said, "The woman who was murdered." Cledamae shook her head as if she understood nothing of what I said and then wandered off in the general direction of her family plot. "Thanks for coming," I called out after her.

Ardis and Herbert walked away together, leaving Al and me to wait for Sparky's return. Al, standing across the hole from me, had his eyes locked on the cottonwood trees and said, "Thanks for saying a few words, Rufus. I hope someday we'll locate her family to have a proper service for her."

"Of course, Sheriff. You think we had a covert mourner behind us there? Perhaps one of the Bodine Brothers or the collective out for an early evening romp?"

"Fletch and Jesse took Frankie to Spokane this morning to have his wisdom teeth extracted. They were going to stay the night," Al said.

"So that would effectively eliminate the Bodines from the list of suspects," I offered. "Although there's no law against watching a burial from a distance."

"Whoever it was had been watching since we arrived. Can't tell who it was. He or she disappeared into trees. If you wouldn't mind waiting here for Sparky, I'll just go see what I might find over there." Al walked toward the trees then over his shoulder called out, "Would you ask Sparky to even out the ground in that grave so she'll rest level?"

###

Dear Aunt Alice,

My son is leaving for the Marine Corps soon. I'm beside myself with worry. I'm worried about those brutish, blasphemous men he'll be forced to live and work with. I'm worried he'll be influenced toward a life of smoking, drinking, and fornication. He's a sensitive young man with so much potential, but I fear he is easily influenced. How can I convince him to stay on the righteous path?

Signed,

Worried Mother

Dear Worried,

There's little a mother can do at this point in a young man's life. You've given him the tools to make the right decisions, but you can't force him to use them. Pray

*that he remembers to pack his tool box in his duffel bag.
We can't keep the fledglings in the nest forever. They need
to soar on their own.*

###

The jail visiting area, which doubled as the cafeteria, smelled faintly of Pine-Sol and macaroni 'n cheese. Wallace stood from his chair at a long table in the visiting area, greeting me with a smile of supreme delight. Wallace had grown gaunt during the two weeks he'd been incarcerated. He wore the jail issue light blue denim shirt and beltless denim jeans reminiscent of Cledamae's cemetery landscaping attire. He was in need of a haircut and decent shave, and for the first time in all the years I'd known him, Wallace appeared unfocused.

"I wish I could have been there. How was it?" Wallace asked. I waved a salute at Deputy Steve Luehrs who stood in the threshold of the door between the visitor area and the cells, posturing with his legs spread and arms folded across his chest. He curled his lip and nodded back.

In detail I recounted Rachel's burial that had taken place an hour earlier, reciting verbatim what was said and by whom. I didn't, however, mention anything about our

witness in the cottonwoods, and for all I knew, there may not have been a witness. Al found no evidence of anyone having recently been in the near cottonwoods—no cigarette butts, candy wrappers, or trampled ground.

"I'm sorry Bridey didn't go. She could have sung like she did at Earl's service." Wallace looked at me without answering. "Better that she didn't, I suppose," I said finally.

"Your Aunt Pip brought some oatmeal cookies this morning. I shared them with the other prisoners and deputies. There are only three others prisoners. Patrick Thomas is here for being drunk and driving his tractor down Highway 2 at oncoming traffic, fortunately during daylight hours. And Deputy Steve brought Claude Roberts in last night. It seems Claude thought he had a right to Loren Colburn's log splitter. Loren didn't quite see it that way. And there's a fellow—a hitchhiker—whose name I didn't get who--"

"How's the food?" I interrupted his unusually bonhomous rambling. The hooligans in jail with Wallace were of little concern to me.

"It's good, Rufus. It's all good." As if he'd grown weary of our conversation, Wallace stood and moved to the wall of barred windows. I followed him to a view that was hardly worth the trip. The second floor jail windows looked out at the back alley between the county court house and the hardware store, ancient cinder bricks and whitewashed boards offered a view as bland as a bowl of cream of wheat.

"There's a burly yellow cat that prowls this alley two or three times a day. Just as slow and steady as you please, stopping in the same place every time to lick his front paws and give himself a good stretch," Wallace said. He looked down at me, a quizzical expression on his face. "How come I never had a cat, Rufus? I think I would have liked to have a cat."

"We'll get you a cat when you're out of here." I awkwardly patted his forearm, much like my father patted mine to offer assurance that all would eventually be right in my world. "Although I must admit I'm not much of a cat fancier," I said softly.

A pleasantly plump young woman who worked in the hardware store came out to the alley for a cigarette. Wallace and I had a bird's eye view of the woman pacing

back and forth as she lit up, and then leaning against the wall to linger over its finish. "Sometimes the cat will rub against her leg and she'll bend over and pet it. I think she must be a kind person," Wallace said.

"She seems agreeable enough." I said. "I think she drives over from Sparta. She's not from Wind River."

"She must know Susanne Peterson if she's from Sparta," he said flatly.

The name Susanne Peterson was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't immediately hang a coat on her hook. She soon came into focus as the girl Wallace and Bridey saved from drowning in Lake Lucero.

"I'm going to plead guilty, Rufus," Wallace announced.

I didn't fully comprehend what I was hearing. I felt myself on the brink of tears. "You're what?"

"I wonder if that little Sparta bakery still makes that divinity candy. Remember when we took Winona over—"

"Fuck the divinity. You're pleading guilty?" I wasn't aware I had raised my voice to alert level until Deputy Steve moved quickly toward us. I waved him off. "You *didn't* kill Rachel Wall. Why the hell would you plead guilty?"

My voice now hushed.

"It will just be easier," he said.

At a complete loss for words and engulfed in a maelstrom of disbelief, anger, and fear, I spun away from Wallace like a nickel on a countertop. Wallace Kilcannon was not guilty of the murder of Rachel Wall. He was no more capable of murder than I or Bridey or Al Blue for that matter. Watching Wallace as he continued to look out the window, I made an attempt to gather some composure. I drew in a long, deep breath and asked, "Easier for whom?"

Wallace turned from the window and led me toward the table once again. I couldn't take my eyes from his, trying to detect a sign that he'd actually gone crazy or was drugged or hypnotized. He interlaced his fingers and pulled his palms together on the table.

Clearly focused now, he looked at me with burrowing intensity. "It won't do you or anyone else any good to protest. I've signed the statement admitting guilt."

"Jesus, Wallace, you didn't kill her."

"I may as well have. My hesitation to act in a timely manner caused her death," he said.

"Your parents again?"

He closed his eyes, smiled and nodded.

"So you didn't make it in time. That doesn't make you guilty of murder," I said. "Think how this will affect Bridey and Cal. Think about how this will affect me, for chrissake."

"I'm sorry, but there's just no other choice," he said. "The attorney Cal hired, that fellow who ran against Leonard Scoffone all those years ago, said a plea would be the easiest for all concerned."

"He thinks you're guilty?"

Wallace leaned toward me. "Actually, he doesn't know what to think. He says if the prosecutor and judge accept the deal, I'll spend the rest of my life in an asylum for the criminally insane. He says the evidence the state has is circumstantial, but strong enough to convict."

"We'll demand you take a lie detector test," I said.

"Now, Rufus, you know that I can control my heartbeat and respirations. I'd pass the test easily," Wallace said with confidence.

A feeling of utter helplessness vanquished all other emotions I was experiencing. Tears welled up and I let them flow. "You're not a criminal and you're not insane. This is bullshit. Who planted the purse in your jacket sleeve? Was

it whoever killed Rachel? And what about Delight? You said you were with her that night."

"Here's the thing," Wallace said with a most aggravating slop jar smile on his face. "I was only with her half the night. You know how she'll just drift off into a deep sleep almost immediately after, well, you know."

"She'll testify you were with her the night Rachel was killed."

"She would, but Leonard Scoffone says she's an unreliable witness."

"Bullshit. Delight Daggett is the reigning monarch of truth and honesty," I said.

"Leonard said because Delight and I were romantically involved, she wouldn't be a good witness for the defense. He said he'd tear her apart. I can't let that happen, now can I?"

"I'd fucking like to see him try that," I said with unrepressed disdain for the prosecutor.

Wallace looked thoughtful for a moment then said, "Are Delight and I romantically involved, Rufus?"

I raised my hands to dismiss his question. "We'll explore that later. How does Leonard think you got Rachel

all the way to Lake Lucero? Need I remind that you don't drive and don't have a car."

Wallace smiled and shook his head. "Leonard's quite clever here. He says Rachel hitched a ride out to the lake to meet with someone and that I followed her on my bicycle to the lake. And killed her there."

"What the hell is he talking about. What the hell are you talking about? Just tell me who killed Rachel," I demanded.

"To reveal the name would bring darkness into a house full of sorrow," Wallace said. "A house that will see far more sorrow in the months to come." He stood and reached out his hand as if closing a real estate transaction with a favored client. I reluctantly grasped his hand, realizing we likely hadn't performed such a formal ritual since the first day we met fifteen years earlier. Through a firm, friendly smile Wallace thanked me for coming and asked, "Will you get back to me about the romantic involvement?"

I sat in the jail visitor room for thirty minutes after Wallace left, staring into the dark abyss of disheartening news. Now and then I'd hear faint voices and laughter from the jail cells, but none I could identify as

belonging to Wallace. Ultimately there was no sense to be made of what had just transpired.

Leaving the county courthouse, I passed the alley we had been gazing upon. The yellow cat was strutting in my direction. Just as Wallace said it would, the cat stopped mid-alley to lick both of its paws and stretch, then it quickened its pace and headed toward me baring its pointy little teeth as it yowled ravenously. I turned tail and headed home with great haste. I was running away from the cat but knew in truth I wanted to run away from Wind River.

###

Bridey sat in Winona's sidecar as we sped along Highway 2, the wind floating her long black hair around like Botticelli's *Venus* at her birth. A hard, forced smile had settled on Bridey's face, a beautiful, youthful face that had aged a decade in just a month with the trespass of tiny lines around her mouth and the corners of her eyes.

"Get me out of here," she'd said.

"Where?" I asked.

"Anywhere but Wind River," she replied bitterly.

I delivered the startling information to Cal and Bridey in the hotel lobby early the morning after Wallace

delivered his unbearable news. It was as incomprehensible to them as it was to me. I had slept little that night. Disturbing dreams of coyotes mating with alley cats shocked me awake each time I managed to doze off. Cal's response at the news was to set his jaw and exit immediately, presumably to see Wallace. Bridey whimpered, turned white, and then vomited on the lobby carpet.

She and I headed out in Winona with no destination in mind. I gave Winona her head to take us wherever. It was insufferably hot that morning, but once we set forth on our journey to that place called nowhere in particular, neither one of us truly noticed nor cared about the heat. Straddling Winona with Bridey at my side, my thoughts fixed on my dear Wallace and the hole he had hand drilled in our lives.

In time a hot road mirage materialized ahead and I thought for a fleeting moment I saw the figure of a tall dark-haired man walking toward us. My mind tricked me into believing it was Wallace escaped from jail. I slowed Winona and raised my goggles to my forehead to get a clearer view. There was no man. The day's heat and lack of sleep was taking its toll.

At that moment Bridey began to hit her fists on her thighs, a rhythmic pounding that increased so dramatically in force I feared she might hurt herself. I pulled off to the soft shoulder of the road, dismounted Winona, and rushed around to the open side of the sidecar. My feet dangling off the ground, my upper body balancing on the edge of the car, I held down her hands the best I could. After what seemed a long ten minutes, she was exhausted. Her body and soul spent, Bridey drooped in the seat like an empty suit.

Winona took us to Mitt Mountain and the open meadow where Wallace and I watched his meteors trace across the sky just a few short weeks earlier. On the ride up Bridey had reached across and rested her hand on my forearm. I swear I felt a transfer of energy from her to me—an incandescent tingling that moved from my arm to my shoulder to the back of my neck. A comforting feeling enveloped me and I knew we'd manage and all would be set right one way or another.

The meadow atop Mitt Mountain had morphed naturally from a field of lush early summer grass and wildflowers to a near color-neutral field of dry, brittle grass. The only

spots of color came from the pale and buttercup yellow of late blooming wild daffodils on the edge of the wooded area. I steered Winona directly to the shady perimeter of the meadow where we remained seated.

"Why didn't we think to bring water?" Bridey asked as she wiped at a rivulet of sweat making its way from hairline to chin.

"I don't suppose either one of us was thinking clearly when we left Wind River," I said.

"I think we're better now," Bridey said, her tone sprinkled with cautious optimism.

"We're better now," I affirmed.

Bridey slid down the best she could in the sidecar to rest her head. She closed her eyes and breathed as deeply as she did when she was just a wee girl and I would be reading to her from our favorite book, de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*. For a sweet, short time I had Bridey convinced that I, Rufus Dandee, was, in fact, The Little Prince returned.

"You've been to Africa, haven't you, Rufus?" she asked, fanning her face with her opened hand.

"Even its deserts are beautiful," I said.

"I wish Winona could take us there," Bridey said, her eyes still closed, perhaps imagining an open African veldt with its curiously captivating bushes, shrubs, spindly trees, and exotic predator and prey. She smiled and turned her open eyes to me. "Or better yet, Asteroid B-612," she said.

"Crossing an ocean and rocketing into space are not among Winona's amazing talents," I said sadly. "We must return to Wind River and our responsibility."

Once again Bridey reached out and touched my arm.

###

Bridey, Al, and I sat drinking cold lemonade outside the *Tribune* office the evening Bridey and I returned from Mitt Mountain. The horribly hot day had reformed into an altogether pleasant evening with the shrill chirping of crickets and buzzing of grasshoppers making the music of our night. Bridey made her twilight journey from the hotel carrying a sealed gallon glass jar of lemonade. Years earlier she'd discovered the handwritten *Virgil's Special Lemonade* recipe lodged deep inside a kitchen cabinet between the cabinet wall and top shelf. Bridey made the recipe her own. At the secret core of the recipe was a

simple syrup that guaranteed sugar diffusion throughout. She'd set aside the largest lemon to slice and add to the lemonade for what she called decorative appeal. The drink achieved countywide renown during the summer months. And despite endless requests, Bridey never revealed her simple syrup secret. I regret not having told her on that memorable night of that memorable day we failed to run away from it all, that it was actually my Grandmother Virginia's recipe.

Bridey was a comforting sight for weary eyes as she came up Alder Street cradling the big glass jar in front of her, the lemonade and yellow slices sloshing about inside. I thought when she saw Al sitting out front with me she would reconsider our rendezvous. To our great delight, she didn't.

Bridey reported Cal made an attempt earlier that morning to talk some sense into Wallace, but met with the same wall of passive intractability I encountered. Cal had sequestered himself in his bedroom for the evening. Ardis Dardanell was ensconced at the front desk to do the hotel's bookkeeping and, no doubt, keeping a watchful eye out for Cal if he needed anything. Aunt Pip had turned in early

with a book she'd taken from my shelf, I believe it was *Gulliver's Travels*.

Bridey wore a soft pansy purple, thin strapped sundress and tatty sandals that she kicked off as soon as she arrived at the *Tribune*. Her hair was still damp from a shower; she'd piled it loosely on top of her head. The faint fragrance of ripe strawberries accompanied her and remained throughout the evening. I was reminded once again that our little girl had left us.

"Who would have had access to Wallace's room?" Al asked Bridey.

There was hesitation in her response. "I suppose anyone staying in the hotel would have had access."

"He ever lock his bedroom door?" Al asked.

"Not that I'm aware of," she answered.

"Most visitors didn't go to the third floor, isn't that right?" I offered.

"Sometimes Orpha Rose would come up if she needed something late at night—a glass of milk or an extra blanket. But other than that, no," she said.

I committed to put my anger and confusion at abeyance through the day, but emotional and physical fatigue had

undermined my resolve. Like a broken bone penetrating the skin, anger punched its way through. "Why in the name of everything worthwhile in the world, would Wallace plead guilty?" I demanded, as if anyone present could provide an answer.

Al emptied his glass of lemonade and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand. He said quietly, "That's what I'd like to know. I sense he's trying to protect someone, but who and why?"

"Just exactly how do we go about sussing out that information—information that has so far eluded all of us? Who had access to Wallace's room to plant the purse? And who the hell was Rachel Wall?" I immediately regretted the vitriol of my tone as the words exploded from my mouth. "And what about that prescription Doc filled?" I asked with a little less bite.

"Forged," Al said.

Bridey squirmed a bit in her chair—stirring up the spirit of fresh strawberries once again. "Can't you see Al is doing everything he can to help Wallace?"

Al didn't believe for a minute that Wallace was guilty and I knew it. He was likely as frustrated as the rest of

us, but he was a conscionable lawman trying to get to the truth in a methodical manner along a straight and steady path. I, on the other hand, wanted Wallace out of jail that instant, sitting with us enjoying my grandmother's lemonade on a brilliantly clear summer night surrounded by good friends and the sounds of nature's mating calls.

"You're so right, Bridey. Sheriff Blue, please accept my most humble apology." Al waved the apology off as unnecessary. I stood up heavily and stretched. "If you'll excuse me, I think we need a snack or two. I'll just pop upstairs and pull something together."

I've acknowledged my penchant for eavesdropping. Had I been born a dwarf in Anglo-Saxon England I would surely have been commissioned to hide beneath the long eavesdrop of a cottage's heavily thatched roof, cheerfully executing my duty monitoring the conversations of those at entrance or egress and even those interior interchanges of either an intimate or communal nature. Whether intentional or accidental, much can be learned by listening to conversations to which one is not an invited party.

"I'm sorry for the way I've behaved toward you the last couple of weeks," Bridey told Al. I was standing to

the side of the open *Tribune* doors, a half-empty bag of stale potato chips and an only slightly fresher box of Ritz Crackers in hand.

"I probably deserved it," he responded.

"No, you didn't," she said followed by a long silence. I took the opportunity to stealthily slip my fingers into the open bag of chips to withdraw several. They weren't as stale as I had suspected. Fearful that Bridey and Al might hear me chewing the chips, I held them on my tongue to soften before swallowing.

"Bridey," Al started and stopped, then started again. "Bridey, I'm quite a bit older than you are."

"Ten years isn't all that much," she said.

"It can be when it comes to experience."

"What kind of experience?" she asked.

"Well, the kind of experience that allows a person to step back and take a long, hard look at a situation," he said, his voice trailing off a bit at the end. I slipped another chip into my mouth and leaned closer to the door so I might better hear what was coming next. It is a loathsome truth that one who eavesdrops seldom is allowed to glimpse upon the countenance to capture astonishment, fear,

anguish, joy, ecstasy or any of a myriad of facial expressions that are a powerful aid to interpret a verbal message. Fortunately, I was notably astute at interpreting the nuances of spoken language.

"I appreciate that about you," she said. "I've never had a relative accused of murder before. I hardly know what to think or how to act."

I was confident Al was not speaking of experience with law enforcement generally or Wallace's situation specifically, but rather his deep feelings for Bridey, feelings I'm guessing tormented him day and night. Bridey didn't push open the door Al had left ajar. During the short pause before he spoke, I imagined Al attempting to conceal the sorrowful look that surely had swept over his face. I hung back just long enough for him to say, "I'll do all I can to help."

Declining Al's offer to see her home, Bridey set out for the hotel at half-past eleven, the empty lemonade jar balanced on her hip. As if she'd managed to liberate the burden of heavy heartache, her pace was slow and easy. Al watched her make her way down Alder Street until she

blended into the darkness beyond the jaundiced cast from the last street lamp.

"What's it going to take for you to tell her how you feel?" I asked.

Al transmitted a most exasperated look to me. He stretched his long legs out from his chair and shook his head. "It's that obvious?" he asked.

"Only to a man who has his finger on the pulse of romance in Wind River," I said.

Al laughed mockingly. "Romance in Wind River? Come on, Rufus, the only romance around here is the Bodine Brothers and their odd relationship with fire." He pulled back and studied me for a moment. "And how is it that your finger is on the pulse of romance?"

"Years of experience in matters of the heart," I asserted smugly.

"You and Delight Daggett in particular?" he asked.

"My relationship with Delight is romance in its purest form, animal instinct layered upon mutual respect." I glanced at Al. "You're smirking," I said.

"You got any beer?"

I hadn't planned on telling Al or anyone about the night soon after Rachel's arrival in Wind River that I witnessed her *in flagrante delicto* with none other than Leonard Scoffone in the clerk's office. At least I surmised it was Leonard. Al and I were half way through our bottles of beer when I let the story slip.

"Can you be sure it was Leonard?" Al asked cautiously. "Did you see his face?"

"Sadly, no."

"Perhaps what you witnessed has more to say about Rachel Wall than Leonard Scoffone." Al looked at me with sad, weary eyes. "Jesus, Rufus, this whole thing is a fucking circus."

"And the ringmaster is directing our performance from behind bars," I said.

###

Deadly Fire at Tisdale's Ten-in-One Sideshow; Three

Performers Die Several Injured

Monday, April 16, 1923

Wind River, Washington

A fire Saturday at the Tisdale's Ten-in-One Sideshow claimed the life of its owner, Wendell Tisdale, 43, The Fat

Lady Angela DeRohan, 35, and Harold Olpin The One-Eyed Giant, 28. The fire, apparently from an overturned kerosene lamp, started in the main tent at approximately 2 AM. Miss DeRohan was asleep in the tent when the fire broke out. Tisdale and Olpin made a valiant attempt to rescue Miss DeRohan, who reportedly weighed 450 pounds; but, the effort of these two brave men was to no avail. All three perished when the tent roof collapsed on them.

The Tisdale Ten-in-One Sideshow has been in Wind River since Wednesday. With only eight human oddities remaining and no show tent, the troop will cancel its remaining touring dates. The victims' remains will be sent to their family members in the New Jersey and Massachusetts areas.

According to Juice McCracken, driver and barker, Wendell Tisdale had been in the circus and sideshow business his entire life. Miss DeRohan and Olpin had joined the troop in 1920. The seven-feet-two-inch tall Olpin was born with only one eye. Sadly, Miss DeRohan and Olpin were engaged to be married at the end of the season. Tisdale leaves behind a wife and a daughter who reside in New Jersey.

Virgil Caulfield pledged one-hundred dollars for the remains of the victims to be sent home. Mr. Caulfield said, "We'll remember these folks for the entertainment they provided and the way they were while with us, not their horrific deaths."

###

I knew Wendell Tisdale from Wind River Reel Number 32. The placard reads *Wendell Tisdale Meets Virgil Caulfield at the Ten-in-One-April 14, 1923*. It's awkwardly staged with Virgil walking up to Wendell, who stands at the open flaps of the sideshow tent. The morning light is brilliant; but, beyond the open tent flaps is a dangerously black void, a cave curiously detached from the humankind. A dusty baby breeze slithers under the tent and momentarily billows the canvas sides. I effortlessly conjure the circus aura. The sweet odor of spun cotton candy, its sugary molecules of enchantment filling the air and settling on my tongue. The cacophonous rattling of boyhood excitement, the squealing of little girls, and the rumbling of adult fatigue resonate.

Wendell beckons Virgil to enter the tent. Feigning fear, Virgil hesitates then finally withdraws into the

obscure recess. Wendell directs the camera's attention to a sandwich board reading *Tisdale's Ten-in-One Side Show—Spectacular Human Oddities Never Seen Before!* He points to his name on the board, removes his straw boater hat, and takes a deep bow. He's a darkly handsome man, nattily dressed in a lightweight linen suit, a rose bud snuggled in his lapel. Close observation reveals a discernable twinkle in the eye of our sideshow owner. Finally a smiling Virgil emerges from the abyss. He shakes Wendell's hand and exits the frame as Wendell doffs his hat to Virgil and then the camera.

In less than seventy-two hours Wendell Tisdale, the Fat Lady, and the One-Eyed Giant will be dead in Wind River.

Wendell was an achondroplasian dwarf like me—normal trunk, short limbs, large head. Ambushed by fire in a sideshow tent, the courageous Mister Tisdale left behind a wife and a daughter. A wife and a daughter.

Chapter Fourteen

"Why the hell won't he see me, Rufus?" Delight said, her voice weakened by the hurt in her heart. Her eyes were bloodshot, her nose near scarlet from the rush of emotion. It had been three days since Wallace's sanity hearing and the pronouncement that he was a dangerous schizophrenic likely to offend again. He would be transported to the state hospital at the end of the week. "*Jeg savner ham så mye*. So much. Is there nothing we can do?" she said. Like Delight, I had shed so many tears of longing and regret for Wallace, that the physical manifestations of emotion were entirely spent, they just knocked about inside me like pebbles in a maraca. All I could manage in response to Delight was an evasive nod and shrug.

I was sitting at my Royal typewriter, trying to pull together an edition of the *Tribune*. Attention to the newspaper had waned entirely since Wallace's confession. Somehow the trivia of existence in Wind River wasn't significant enough to warrant even feeble effort. I'd only managed to get out two thin editions in three weeks. Not a single *Wind River Tribune* subscriber complained. Whether

that was a comment on the value of the newspaper to the community or sympathy for our great collective loss, I'll never know.

Delight and I sat in somber silence for a good, long time, both of us staring off into different corners of the office. Delight pulled herself to standing like an ancient soul who must call upon every ounce of strength to move a worry-worn body. I wanted to lay out some reassurance to her, but I had nothing to offer. She stood looking down at me.

"Do you want to go upstairs for a cuddle?" I asked, knowing full well her answer.

She smiled softly. "Perhaps another time."

"Wallace loves you, Delight. He probably wants you to remember him during the good days."

"In all the years the three of us have been friends, not once has Wallace told me how he felt about me." Delight's words were woven with such regret and sadness that they settle around the office like soot from a coal furnace.

I wanted to tell Delight that she was the love of Wallace's life. The first thought in his morning and the

last in his night. That she was the dazzling light that cuts his dark like a diamond cuts glass. Wallace just couldn't, or wouldn't, reach into his depths for those feelings. In her heart I think Delight knew that.

###

It is a page in my life I turn with consummate reluctance. Wallace and I sat at a table in the visitor area of the jail as we had each day of his incarceration in the Wind River County Jail. Except for Deputy Steve on duty at the threshold of the door, we were once again the alone. We each had a round mustard yellow plastic dish of chocolate pudding in front of us. Wallace had excitedly waved me over toward the table when I arrived, spreading his arms out in near jubilation at the lumpy brown substance in the dishes. "A special treat tonight left over from dinner, Rufus," he said. "The best chocolate pudding I've tasted in a long time. I've had two helpings already." Wallace devoured the pudding as if it were a divine confection. I thought it tasted like shit seasoned with more shit, but out of deference to Wallace's enthusiasm, I worked at it with bitty bites.

Wallace finished his pudding, carefully manipulating the edge of his spoon around the dish to capture as much of the remains as possible. He leaned back and smiled down at his vacant dish. "Mother used to make chocolate pudding as good, if not better, than that. It was my favorite and she'd make it every Friday night."

Then without warning Wallace's thoughts launched elsewhere. The happy pudding-eating genial fellow had left the room. I pushed my near-full dish toward him, but he declined with a single shake of his head.

Wallace's voice was now etched with a heart-stinging melancholy. "My lawyer says I'll see a psychiatrist at the hospital who will make it so I won't see Mother and Father anymore. Why wouldn't I want to see them anymore, Rufus?"

"No one can force them out of your life. They're your parents. They'll never leave you. Never," I said. I took a long look at the man sitting across the table from me. Still handsome, with a fresh haircut and shave, he looked healthier than he had in since he'd been in jail. "Do your mom and dad know what's happened? That you're going to be locked up in a hospital for the rest of your life for a crime you didn't commit?"

"The last time I saw them was the night Orpha Rose died. I'm worried I won't see them again," he said ignoring my question. In that miserable moment we reached our hands across the table to one another and held tight.

Before dawn the following morning Al Blue and Steve Luehrs transported Wallace to the state hospital.

###

I'd grown so accustomed to Pip's presence in Wind River that the thought she might be leaving rarely entered my mind. When it did, I smacked it back hard and fast to the deepest recesses of rumination. So gracious and unpretentious was Pip that not once did I hear a native Wind Riverian express anything but delight in having her with us—remarkable acceptance since most of us looked with disdain and suspicion upon outsiders. In fact, a day after Rachel's service, Herbert Woodcock mentioned to me that unlike most Easterners who passed by or tried to settle in Wind River, Miss Pip, as he called her, didn't see herself as the big New York toad in the western puddle. She was one of us. I was prepared to suggest that Pip make Wind River her permanent home. I'd build her a comfortable house on ten acres Cledamae Howell had for sale. There was a stable

small stream with year-round flow that dissected the ten acres. The land offered a glorious view of Mitt Mountain, and a fine mix of forest and meadow. I thought I might build a wing for myself in the house, with its design and fittings to accommodate my size. Of course I would never give up my own place above the *Tribune* office.

Wallace had been gone a week when I heard Pip and Bridey half a block from the *Tribune* office announce their approaching arrival with laughter that had been sorely lacking of late. Pip and Bridey strolled into the *Tribune* office arm-in-arm, school-girl smirks on their faces.

"Aunt Pip thinks I will marry Alabaster Blue," Bridey said. Her eyes truly danced with joy at the notion.

"Has he asked you?" I wondered with a smile.

"Of course he hasn't," Pip answered for Bridey. "He doesn't know he should quite yet, but he will. All in good time."

"I've work to do at the hotel," Bridey announced sadly. With an anemic smile and equally weak finger flutter farewell, Bridey slowly backed out of the office.

It had become increasingly difficult for Bridey to be at the hotel since Wallace's departure. Once she'd cleaned

his room from stem to stern in preparation for what she thought would be his certain and imminent return, she spent as little time as possible there seeing to her daily tasks and the infrequent needs of a handful of guests. Cal hadn't been seen out and about in Wind River for several weeks, but Bridey thought he fared well enough as he managed hotel business holed up in his room.

Pip wore the Dickie bib overalls Delight had given her weeks earlier when we took Winona out to visit with Thelma Scoffone. In fact, I rarely saw Pip when she wasn't wearing the overalls. Despite the mannish attire, Pip maintained her ladylike demeanor and accessorized with a string of day pearls at her neck. When Bridey left us, Pip mounted Winona's saddle and grabbed her handle bars. She leaned forward and tucked her head down as if driving hell bent for leather. "Damn, I wish I'd known the thrill of the motorcycle when I was younger," she said.

"It's never too late, darling," I said.

"We've had an offer for Dandee Diapers," Pip announced, still in her racing posture.

"What do you mean an offer?"

"To purchase the company. It's a good, solid offer we should accept," she said.

"Why in the world would we—"

She sat up straight. "Rufus, dear," she interrupted. "These new disposables are seeping into the diaper market. Granted, parents will be slow to accept them because they're different, but eventually convenience always trumps tradition."

"A world without Dandee Diapers," I said. "I can't imagine it."

"It should come as no surprise to you that I've outgrown my interest in diapers," she said.

"Well, it does surprise me."

"Bless your heart. You never were much for the working end of the diaper business, which is certainly all right with me. I have some papers requiring your signature and then I'm off to New York to finalize the deal."

"Wait a minute," I said throwing my arms up to call a halt to the madness being laid out in such a matter-of-fact manner. "Why didn't you bring this up when you first arrived in Wind River? You sound as if it's a foregone

conclusion that I'll agree to the sale." I tried to disguise my anger, but knew I was failing miserably.

Pip dismounted Winona and slid her hands and forearms into the bib of her overalls as if stuffing them in a hand warming muff. "You can sign or not. Regardless, I'm finished with Dandee Diapers." Pip walked out of the *Tribune* office into the glow of a warm autumn afternoon. With her hands still hidden in her bib, she looked left down the street then right, threw a forced smile back at me, and walked away.

Disturbing images burned unsteadily in my sleep that night. Showing like one of the Wind River Reels I'd grown so fond of watching, a dream flickered of an adult Rufus wearing a diaper with the words *Keep Your Baby's Bottom Snug and Dry, Day and Night With Dandee Diapers* scrolled across the front diaper flap. I'm in a crib with my hairy man legs spread wide as unknown hands work expertly to disengage safety pins holding the diaper in place. One strong, calloused hand grabs my ankles tightly to elevate my bottom while the other hand whisks the soiled diaper away and throws it into the air where it vaporizes. And there I lay in the crib, resplendently naked. The genitals

between the legs of the dream Rufus are the tiny, uncorrupted pink of a baby boy. Virgil Caulfield, wearing a battered John Bull topper, leans into my face and coos in a most feminine voice *Now aren't you a special little man.*

My signature on the documents early the following morning sealed a deal that was at once heartbreaking for the demise of a family business legacy and uplifting for the truckload of money Pip and I could invest. Admitting she found Deputy Steve mildly amusing and could probably tolerate him about as long as a hangnail before she bit it off, Pip hired him to drive her the one-hundred and fifty miles to Seattle for her flight to New York.

She and Deputy Steve left just after dusk that evening. Woefully weak with goodbyes, a quick embrace and kiss on the cheek were the only manifestations of farewell Pip gave to Bridey and me. She offered no words of regret for her departure or expectation that she would see us soon. I didn't have the opportunity to broach the topic of her moving west and building a home for the two of us. I think I was afraid she would turn me down.

###

"She should have checked with me before she left," Al said. He had only discovered Pip had returned to New York when he dropped by the hotel early the following day to see her.

"I would have thought Deputy Steve told you Pip hired him to drive her to Seattle yesterday," I said. I was having a breakfast special at the High Desert—a four inch stack of sourdough pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. Al was having coffee. He had been wearing his uniform more regularly than his civilian clothes while on duty. His uniform that day was clean and freshly pressed; his leather spiffed shiny and conditioned.

"Steve doesn't tell me what he does when he's off duty," he said.

"Personally, I can't think of any information that interests me less," I said. "And you wanted to speak to Pip concerning--?"

"I'm questioning everyone who may have had access to your darkroom," he said.

"Ergo, access to the potassium oxalate. But seriously, you don't think Pip had anything to do with Rachel's death?"

Al took a quick sip of coffee followed fast by a face-scrunching that clearly indicated the brew wasn't to his liking. "This tastes like yesterday's shit warmed up twice. And no, I don't think she had anything to do with Rachel's death. I've talked to Harvey and Bridey separately," he said.

"Anything edifying from either?" I asked.

"Harvey was, of course, aware of it and used it. Bridey didn't have a clue." Al motioned to the waitress, a surly, pencil-thin gal named Lil who put her Bazooka Bubble Gum on display for the dubious pleasure of everyone in the room, for more and hopefully fresher coffee. "I think she's doing better now," he added.

"Bridey? Yes, I think she is," I said.

"The fingerprints taken at Rachel's autopsy--." Al paused as Bazooka Lil delivered him a fresh cup of coffee, and I tried desperately to vanquish the disquieting image of dead Rachel's ink stained fingertips from my mind. "The FBI report finally came in on them." He sat stock-still staring into his coffee cup. Again, one of his Arctic ice moments when I figured he was doing internal battle over whether to share any additional information with the

reporter across the table from him. A robust saloon fly lit on the rim of his coffee cup. Apparently engrossed in his thoughts, Al didn't even try to swat the filthy rascal away.

I thought of trying to mitigate his obvious concern about the information, but chose to continue depleting the sourdough stack. I averted my eyes from my task and said, "I think the sourdough starter must be as old as Wind River itself. The cakes get more vinegary and lemony each time I—" "

Al said at last, "Darlene Tarr was arrested for soliciting in Portland, Oregon, in 1949. She was a guest for thirty days at the Multnomah Juvenile Detention Center. California 1955. She served an eighteen month stretch in Tehachapi for attempted murder. Apparently a john decided she wasn't worth the price of admission and tried to slam and scam. Darlene didn't appreciate his attitude and exacted a pound of flesh with a nine inch butterfly knife."

Al's recounting of Darlene Tarr's rap sheet was spellbinding. Not only was the yarn itself fascinating, but there was an allure in the near palpable pleasure he took in spinning her tale of criminality. I was well aware the

woman we knew as Rachel Wall was capable of treachery and deceit, but I never presumed she would be capable of murder, attempted or accomplished. I shuddered to think how flippant I had been with her and where that flippancy may have taken me.

"There's lots more," Al said. I must have looked like a wide-eyed child sitting with the dark at my back on the edge of a bonfire listening to a ghost story, because Al smiled broadly and shook his head before he continued. "But I'll kick it up to 1960. Darlene Tarr, aka, Billie Jean Rasmussen, bilked an elderly Boise, Idaho, couple out of fifty-thousand dollars."

I gasped and said, "Larceny of the grandest, indeed."

"And change," Al added. "Rachel Wall had an account at the Wind River Community Bank with thirty grand in it. Darlene Tarr managed to elude capture and punishment until, well, the emergence of Rachel Wall."

"You think the filleted john, or the elderly couple had anything to do with her murder?" I asked hopefully.

Al said without conviction, "The law couldn't even catch up with her. I doubt her victims could. I'm guessing

she would change her identity and appearance as easily as I change my socks."

"How does this help us with Wallace's case?"

"It doesn't. A murder victim is still a murder victim," Al said.

I added glumly, "And a guilty plea is still a guilty plea."

###

Miss Sophia Amick Weds Mister Havers Truax

Friday June 18, 1915

(From the Wind River Tribune Archives)

Thursday, June 10th, at the First Presbyterian Church of Wind River, the marriage took place of Miss Sophia Amick, daughter of the late Captain and Mrs. J. Amick, to Mr. Havers Truax. The religious ceremony took place at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the Rev. Jens Forester officiating. The bride wore an attractive lace-trimmed white satin gown. Misses Colleen and Judith McLain, and Miss Madeline Weber attended Miss Amick. Mr. S. J. Kerman served as best man, the bride was given away by Mr. Virgil Caulfield.

The civil marriage took place immediately following, the witnesses being Messrs T. Dill, S. Larson, B. Westerberg. A wedding dinner at the Caulfield Hotel after the civil ceremony was attended by the newlywed couple's intimate friends.

We wish Mr. and Mrs. Truax every happiness.

###

The placard reads *The Wedding of Miss Sophia Amick and Mister Havers Truax, June 10, 1915*. Since Pip had enlightened me as to the genetic connection between Virgil Caulfield and me, this particular Wind River Reel riled me to the degree I have only watched it a few times over the years.

The groom is the very same Havers Truax, high school teacher and amateur astronomer, who proclaimed the anomalous aerial object sighted in Wind River in 1896, was either the planet Venus or a bolide. When the wedding film was made nearly twenty years later, Havers looked to be a man in his early fifties. With a round, vest button-stretching belly, a bald head, and beady eyes peering through wire-rimmed spectacles, Havers appears delighted to have made Sophia Amick, a not entirely unattractive woman

who looks to be at least twenty years younger than he, his new bride. The wedding party poses on the front porch of the hotel. An amused Virgil Caulfield stands between Sophia and Havers. After emphatic celebratory gesticulations at the couple and toward the camera, Virgil reaches out for a hand of the bride and a hand of the groom and joins them together in front of him, and with the power invested in him as the unanointed sovereign of Wind River blesses their union with unheard words. Sophia Amick Truax throws her large bridal posy toward the camera, hitting it dead-on and doubtless throwing the cameraman off his game as he cranks away at the hand powered motion picture camera. The film fidgets out of focus and ends abruptly.

Virginia Caulfield Erlewine didn't know or celebrate her own daughter's wedding or the birth of her granddaughter. She didn't know the beautiful, intelligent, and courageous woman her daughter Alice Mae became. She didn't know her great-grandson's failures and accomplishments.

How would this life have been different had she chosen family over rambling?

###

I couldn't abide the thought of Wallace marking his thirty-seventh birthday in a place where the most vibrant color was gray; where the view from the windows was obstructed by three-inch bars of iron; where the sounds of strangers were plaited with rage, fear, and babbling anxiety. He'd been in the institution for six weeks. Winona and I had made the one hundred-twenty-five mile trip to the state mental hospital on five Saturdays in those weeks. The allotted time for visiting was 3 to 4 PM, with no exceptions. It was never enough. We spoke of all things Wind River except Rachel Wall.

With the turning from a rather lackluster autumn to winter, I had to put Winona on hiatus in the *Tribune* office. Wintery weather arrival also meant I was compelled to impose upon others to take me to visit Wallace. Neither Cal nor Delight had been to see him; but, according to Bridey, Cal had spoken with him on the phone once a week. Delight had no excuse aside from work and the residual sting of his refusal to see her while he was jailed in Wind River.

Bridey wrote him nearly every day. If it wasn't a full-out chatty letter, she'd send a postcard or a drawing

she'd made with the crayons from her box of Crayola Crayons, the 64 color assortment with sharpener. I remember lobbying Wallace against the crayons as a Christmas present for a thirteen-year-old girl who had moved beyond childish things. *She'll need them one day* was his response.

Bridey's drawing talent correlated with her singing talent. But she didn't care. Her artwork of the hotel's interior and exterior, stick-figure guests, Wallace's bedroom, and crudely fleshed out Wind Riverians who had asked after him—all primitive renderings in 64 beautiful, boundless colors. Wallace asked me for one thing in the years he was at the hospital—a scrapbook to keep Bridey's correspondence and crayon drawings.

Bridey and I were set to make the journey for Wallace's birthday weekend when I was forced to surrender to a dreadful flu attack. A fever of 102 degrees, vomiting, and additional horrific symptoms had put me so far down I didn't think there was any occasion to which I could rise again. I was insistent about putting my personal discomfort aside and make the trip, but Doc Nichols reminded me that medical science hadn't advanced to the point where it had a cure for the flu or, for that matter, my immeasurable

hubris. He added with exaggerated testiness that I should think of Wallace and what it would mean for him to be exposed to such a virulent strain of influenza.

"I don't want to go alone, Rufus." Bridey stood on the flat at the top of the outside stairs that led to my apartment. Wearing a red stocking cap and blue woolen coat, and with the tip of her nose and cheeks rosy with cold, she held the door open just enough to see my deplorable condition as I had set up my sick encampment on the sofa. For the first time since I had taken ill, I was aware there was weather worthy of note. Beyond Bridey I could see the earliest flakes of snow dizzily whirling about. A cold current of winter air blasted through the open door.

"Get someone to go with you. Cal or Ardis," I said weakly as I pulled the blanket closer to my chin.

"Asked already. Dad said no, and I'd rather not go with Ardis. The snow is supposed to continue through the day and night," she said.

"You can drive in the snow as well as anyone in town," I said.

"That's not it," she said in an unsteady voice as she withdrew from the door. I only then understood that her

reluctance to go on her own was more about the anticipated distress of seeing Wallace as a forever inmate, the situation only becoming real through firsthand experience. Bridey's ordeal would be lessened if there were someone else to help absorb the hurt.

In my influenza induced stupor I made a foolish suggestion. "Ask Harvey to take you."

Bridey didn't respond for what felt like days, but was likely only seconds. She called out from the stairs, "First of all, I'd rather walk there in this blinding snowstorm than go with Harvey. And second, he's leaving for boot camp in three days."

"Right," I said not actually remembering or caring that he had recovered sufficiently from Cal's thrashing to report to Marine boot camp. I hadn't laid eyes on him since that fateful day, and my connection with Thelma Scoffone and her Aunt Alice persona had melted like ice cream on a hot summer sidewalk.

"Well, there's only one solution," I said pulling myself to a sitting position that sent me immediately woozy. "Al Blue is your man."

To say Al and Bridey were tightlipped upon their return from visiting Wallace would be an overstatement of the highest order. The intensity of the snowstorm that day and night increased dramatically, closing Highway 2 due to exceptionally dangerous drifts. It was completely impassable until the afternoon of the following day. Bridey and Al had to spend the night in a motel close to the hospital. How that arrangement played out, I'll never know. What I do know for sure was from that day forward there was an incandescence to their relationship that could warm even the most hesitant heart.

###

The snow finally stopped after an accumulation of nearly eight inches in Wind River. It wasn't until Tuesday morning that I felt well enough to pull on my winter coat, goloshes, and gloves to do battle with the damnable white stuff that weighed down the sidewalk in front of the *Tribune*. There were few things on this earth that I detested more than shoveling snow, chief among them cleaning the oven and root canals. Ordinarily I'd hire one of the Bodine Brothers to do the dirty work, but all three were otherwise occupied with other shoveling jobs.

Leonard Scoffone pulled his Twilight Blue '62 Corvair station wagon to the curb directly across the street from the *Tribune*. He removed Thelma's wheelchair from the back cargo area and easily lifted his wife from the passenger seat into her chair and covered her lap and legs with a black blanket. Harvey climbed out from the backseat with a small travel bag. I shoveled away, but kept an eye on the medieval dumb show across the street, a pantomime of human social interaction.

The Greyhound Bus pulled up. Harvey knelt in front of his mother's wheelchair and grabbed her hands. He kissed them, then stood and kissed both her cheeks. Thelma dabbed at her eyes and reached out to her son as he backed away and boarded the bus. Not a word, handshake, or hug was exchanged between Harvey and his father, the rift between them as obvious as the affection between Harvey and his mother.

The Greyhound pulled away from the curb. I waved goodbye in the direction of the departing bus, more for Thelma's benefit than an actual expression of farewell to Harvey. Leonard and Thelma exchanged a few words and then he got into the Chevy and drove away. Thelma looked

hopelessly forlorn all bundled up in her wheelchair on the snow-covered sidewalk. She beckoned to me.

"Leonard will be back in about ten minutes to pick me up," she said as I approached.

"Do you want to come over to the office where it's warm? I can brew some tea or--"

She removed her bare hand from beneath her lap blanket and waved my invitation away. "I've missed being Aunt Alice," she said.

"*Tribune* readers have missed her as well," I said.

"I just believe it will be easier for all concerned if we don't continue, what with your connection with the Kilcannon family. If Leonard were to find out that I was your Aunt Alice, I don't know what would happen."

"Are you afraid of him?" I asked, genuinely concerned.

"Frankly no. For fear to exist there must be connection on some level. What he does for me in public is performance art," she said snickering as she looked up the street in the direction from which Leonard would likely be coming. "Harvey and Leonard haven't spoken to one another in weeks. When they were speaking, it always turned into explosive outbursts."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "Fathers and sons should at least be civil to one another."

"Can you do me a favor, Rufus?"

"Anything," I said.

"Will you put an advertisement in the *Tribune* for a housekeeper or practical nurse?"

"Of course."

"Also in the Seattle and Spokane papers?" she asked.

Standing at eye-level to Thelma, I detected a soul wrenching hopelessness in her weary eyes. "Consider it done," I said.

"No one will ever know what a great help Harvey was to me in so many ways," she said and took a deep breath that she held for a moment. "But he needed to get away from Wind River," she added.

Leonard pulled around the block and up to the curb. I bid my adieu to Thelma without word or glance at her husband.

Chapter Fifteen

As near as the state investigator could determine, the fire started around two in the morning in the alley behind Woodcock's Drugs. July 1966, had started out in a most docile manner with mild temperatures and easy breezes, but was evolving into another blessed hot one. Wallace had been gone from Wind River for eight months. Somehow we had all survived the nasty, frigid winter with little snowfall beyond the initial dumping the weekend Bridey and Al made the birthday visit to Wallace.

I awoke to the smell of smoke that had transported through my open bedroom window. I immediately called in the alarm. By the time the volunteer firemen had assembled and the fire equipment had arrived on scene, Woodcock's Drug was fully engulfed and the flames were spreading to the buildings on both sides, including Ardis's accounting office. The notorious Wind River wind combined forces with the airstream of the fire's own making and carried the embers across the street to the defenseless roofs and stick buildings. The entire two blocks of Alder Street were ablaze. There was little the small volunteer company could

do but keep the flames confined to the two block area. Even after arrival of other small volunteer companies from the near county to assist in putting down the conflagration, Alder Street was already a smoldering memory.

Save for exterior damage to the wooden doors and window frames, and most of the window glass broken from the intense heat, the brick *Tribune* building escaped great harm. The hardware store on the opposite end of the block from the *Tribune* was spared significant damage as well. Woodcock's Drugs and Dardanelle Accounting were both completely destroyed. Most other small shops on Main Street from Ida Joiner's beauty parlor to the stationery and all shops between were so structurally damaged that the entire block was proclaimed irredeemable by mid-morning. Fortunately, the injuries to the volunteer firemen were limited to two minor burns and volunteer Cledamae Howell's broken ankle from tripping over a fire hose. The toll taken on the property and spirit of Wind River was incalculable.

Within days of the fire, Al Blue had arrested Jesse and Frankie Bodine for arson. Fletch, the middle brother who appeared to have a smattering of judgment more than his brothers, was visiting his favorite courtesan in Wenatchee

that night, who said she could vouch for him on several levels. The boys folded like cheap aluminum lawn chairs, readily admitting to the crime once Al presented the evidence to them—a gas can with Bodine written on the bottom and kerosene that Jesse had purchased several months earlier from the plump Sparta girl at the hardware store.

The blind drunk Bodines broke into Woodcock's basement, ventilated the floor above by opening the windows, and used several accelerants to set fire to a corner where Herbert stored bandages and paper products. The fire spread so quickly that the boys just made it out the front door.

###

Bodine Brothers Arrested for Arson

Tuesday, July 26, 1966

Wind River, Washington

Jesse Bodine, 32, and his brother Frankie Bodine, 21, have admitted guilt to setting the fire that destroyed most of the buildings on Alder Street. Following an evening of drinking at the High Desert Saloon, the brothers started the fire in the basement of Woodcock's Drugs with gas and kerosene they had in their truck.

Sheriff Al Blue said, "The Bodine Brothers admitted guilt as soon as I showed up at their farm. The evidence gathered by the state fire investigator was incriminating."

The Bodines will be held in the county jail until their sentencing Friday, July 29th. For security reasons the sentencing will be closed to the public.

Several business owners have pledged to rebuild their shops as soon as possible. Herbert Woodcock has setup a temporary apothecary in the Wind River Tribune office. Unfortunately, he will be unable to accommodate customers who wish ice cream treats. Ardis Dardanelle will continue to serve her accounting customers from Room 201 at the Caulfield Hotel.

###

Wallace fell silent when I told him of the Wind River fire and showed him the Tribune articles I had written to date. We sat in reasonably comfortable metal chairs in the visitor hall, again separated by a table. We were surrounded by the quiet hum of private conversations of other inmates and visitors. Occasionally one of the six guards keeping watch over the flock strolled past us.

Wallace pulled his hands from the tabletop and bowed his head. I studied him curved in either prayer or deep thought. His hair was thinning on top with pronounced elements of gray. "Why would Jesse and Frankie do such a thing?" he asked looking up again.

"Equal amounts of genetic stupidity and alcohol," I answered.

He looked away from me, bit his lower lip, then with a quizzical expression turned to me again. "I was thinking I haven't seen Mother and Father because they're still in Wind River. And they can't find me. What do you think, Rufus?"

"Well, I um," I stammered. "I suppose that's a possibility."

"Will you and Bridey watch for them and tell them where I am?" he said.

When Bridey asked about my visit with Wallace I told her only the good things. He appeared relatively healthy and happy, that he was saddened by the fire, and glad no one was seriously injured. He wanted me to pass along his best wishes to Cledamae Howell for a speedy recuperation. And since he'd read all the books in the prison library,

could she send along some recent titles for him? Bridey didn't need to know I suspected Wallace was losing his slippery one-handed grip on this world. That was the last thing the girl needed to hear.

Cal had been an enormous worry for Bridey. More taciturn and isolated than ever, he had taken to disappearing from Wind River for a week at a time without informing Bridey of his reasons or destination. Except for Ardis's bookkeeping, hotel business rested entirely with Bridey. Though overworked and exhausted her sanguine approach to her days and nights was trophy-worthy.

Because of the obscene price Aunt Pip negotiated for the sale of Dandee Diapers I made a cash offer on the Caulfield Hotel. With foresight typical of Wallace at the time, he signed his half ownership in the hotel over to Cal before entering the county jail. One night in late August Cal returned from one of his mystery junkets. I caught him as he made his way up the lobby stairs toward his bedroom. He looked haggard and heavy. The odor of booze trailed him up the stairs.

My offer must have been as inevitable to Cal as the slow, but certain end of summer. He didn't flinch; he

didn't blink. "I'll have my attorney draw up the papers in the morning," he said, then continued up the stairs.

Callahan Kilcannon was finished with the Caulfield Hotel.

"I'll hire staff," I said. "And I want you and Bridey to continue living here as long as you choose."

He paused in his ascent, but didn't look back at me.

"I appreciate that."

###

Wind River Tribune

Obituary Published October 30, 1967

SCOFFONE, Harvey Leonard, Corporal, United States Marine Corps passed away Wednesday, October 18, due to enemy fire in Vietnam. Born April 8, 1945, in Seattle, WA, Harvey grew up in Wind River, Washington, where he attended school and made many friends. Harvey was a combat photographer in Company C, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Division. He is survived by his father and mother, Leonard and Thelma Scoffone, Wind River, WA; grandmother, Bertha Scoffone, Seattle, WA; aunt and uncle Robert and Dana Scoffone, Federal Way, WA; and cousins Charlotte and Sam Scoffone, Federal Way, WA. A service celebrating Harvey's life will be held on Friday,

November 10, 1967 at 11 a.m., Wind River First Presbyterian Church. Burial will follow at the Cottonwood Cemetery.

###

The rules relaxed over the nearly five years Wallace and I visited at the hospital. Visiting hours were extended by an hour; selected inmates could stroll with visitors in the cement exercise yard; food gifts were allowed after careful scrutiny by a guard. I made every attempt not to know the names or faces of the other inmates housed in Wallace's wing. I consciously blurred their uniqueness. They were cookie-cutter men in identical work shirts and jeans with dull faces and insensible eyes. Occasionally a new blur would cross the borderland from society to isolation. I couldn't help but wondered as to what insanely criminal act the new blur had perpetrated. These weren't Wallace's people.

Delight drove me once in the spring of 1968, but couldn't bring herself to enter. Reduced to tears, trembling, and a continuous stream of apologies, she waited in the car.

The exercise yard was enclosed in a "U" shaped by the hospital's three-storey main building, its two wings, and a

mesh security fence crowned with demonic concertina wire obstacles. Two guard towers at each corner of the yard stuck out from the cement like rooks on a chess board. A guard with a rifle cradled in his arms barrel up, stood on the catwalk of each tower. Wallace and I stepped in silence for one walk-around. "If I look just over here," Wallace said as stopped to press his face against the fence. "I can see the parking lot. But I don't see Delight's truck."

A voice crackled over the loudspeaker from one of the guard towers, *Step away from the fence, Kilcannon.*

Wallace stepped back from the fence, raised his arms, then laced his hands behind his head, holding the position for a moment. I suspected that this was not the routine behavior when an inmate was reprimanded, but rather a peculiarity of behavior exclusive to Wallace. He had done it a number of times when a guard had to call out an inmate on some minor infraction. This was the first time I'd heard Wallace called out.

He finally lowered his arms to his sides and we continued to walk the perimeter path of the exercise yard. The yard was contained in the "U" shaped by the hospital's three-storey main building and its two wings. We walked in

silence for one turn around. A large, lone crow strafed through the exercise yard, its dissonant caws and squawks lingering as they bounced off the walls of the buildings. Shielding his eyes from the sun, Wallace tracked its flight in several circles around the yard and finally to the main building roof. Perching on the ledge, it surveyed the yard below, cawing a comment from time to time.

"Mother used to say to watch the flight of the first crow of the year. If he flies into the distance, the watcher will travel much in the coming year, but if he just sits, the watcher will not travel at all," Wallace said. He threw me a half smile and added, "I wonder how true that is."

"Delight has a new truck. A red F-150. Probably why you didn't spot her," I said. Whether he lacked curiosity or knew intuitively the reason, Wallace didn't ask why Delight wouldn't come in on that day or any other. They hadn't seen one another since before his arrest.

Several other inmates and their visitors were walking the fence as well, enjoying an uncommonly warm spring afternoon. One very old gray-haired inmate sat with his female visitor at a picnic table in the shade of one of the

building wings. The woman appeared as old as he. He folded his arms on the table and rested his head there. She touched his shoulder then withdrew her hand. Waiting is a most arduous task.

###

Pip sold our upstate New York mansion and every stick of furniture and sliver of art; every sheet and pillow slip, rug, cup, saucer, pot, and pan; and to Delight's immense disappointment, a '64 Chrysler Imperial, and a '55 Studebaker Coupe. Anything of personal significance was crated and shipped to Wind River. While she was busy flipping the page on our New York history, I had purchased Cledamae's heavenly ten acres and commissioned an architect from Seattle to begin initial work on the house plans. It was difficult to contain excitement for my grandiose dreams; they would be a surprise gift upon Pip's arrival.

Her dismissal of the plan was quick and definite. She insisted that Wind River had such a hold on her that she needed to be close to its beating heart. After an extensive remodeling that involved combining two adjoining rooms on the second floor and plumbing in a bathroom, Aunt Pip moved into the Caulfield Hotel for good in the autumn of 1968.

###

"Is it normal to be this nervous?" Al asked me.

"Never having been in your particular situation, I couldn't say with total certainty. My guess is, yes, grooms are and should be nervous, very nervous," I answered.

Al and I were in the minister's office in the First Presbyterian Church awaiting the signal from him that it was time to step to the altar. I experienced one of my most memorable moments of joy when Al had asked me to be his best man. I knew it would be the only time I would stand in that very intimate group at an altar participating and witnessing the beginning of a marriage. I wore the black satin-lapel tuxedo with side satin-stripped pants I'd worn to Pip's birthday party five years earlier. The pants were surprisingly snug around the middle, and the jacket buttonholes were stretched to courageous limits. Al was handsome in a new black suit, and crisp, white French-cuffed shirt.

I was standing atop the minister's desk trying to perfect a Windsor knot in Al's black tie. It was the closest I'd ever been to Al Blue. "Wallace should be here," he said.

"Yes, he should."

Al had continued to investigate Rachel Wall's murder. The case file was always on his desk, and usually opened. He did everything possible to get to the answers that were proving to be as imperceptible as a rowboat in a heavy sea fog.

"He's quite unreachable now," I said. "Kind as always, of course, but detached and very forgetful. I've told him no less than six times that you and Bridey are being married. He was as thrilled the sixth time as the first."

"He haunts me," Al said with profound sadness.

The minister, a newly ordained fellow who preferred to be called Bill rather than Reverend Johns, entered his office, casting a disapproving look at me on his desk. He cleared his throat in obvious reproach and announced they were ready for us. Without hesitation, Al slipped his hands under my arms and effortlessly lifted me from the desk, setting me gently on the floor. I thought with a small pang of wistfulness that no one had done that since I was eight years old. My father had laughed energetically when he lifted me from the ladder after I had crowned our Christmas

tree with its star topper. My mother had given the topper to Father for their first Christmas as husband and wife.

To some the wedding party may have looked curious. The bride and groom were beautiful and handsome, of course. But there I was as best man, holding together my tuxedo jacket by pulling in my gut as best I could. And our stunning seventy-year-old Aunt Pip was maid of honor. She wore a pink lace cocktail length dress and a white wide-brimmed hat with a single, large pink ostrich wing feather fancied-up one side. Pip had grown to love Bridey and was delighted to stand for her, announcing that she was likely the only true maiden over eighteen in all of Wind River.

Thanks to Ardis, Cal was sober when he gave Bridey away.

The call came while Al and Bridey were on their honeymoon to the Grand Canyon. *Cardiac arrest while sleeping*, the doctor told me on the phone. *The remains would be available in two days for pickup*, he added. Remains available for pickup. It sounded cruel and dispassionate, as if Wallace were a merchandise order available for pick up at will-call.

I wondered with lament if Wallace knew when he laid his head down to sleep the night he died that he wouldn't raise from his bed at the next dawning. Did his mother and father finally show themselves once again?

Rather than the sorrow I anticipated at news of his passing, I wrapped a heavy shawl of inexpressible anger and guilt around myself. I examined my role in this Wind River travesty every single day of my life. Had I not set out those photos of Bridey on the lobby desk, Cal wouldn't have beaten Harvey to within an inch of his wretched life. Leonard Scoffone wouldn't have committed to a vendetta against the Kilcannons. Wallace wouldn't have finished his life alone. My examined life of shouldn't haves and wouldn't haves. I held the rawhide reins of responsibility and despised myself for it.

I felt the killer of Rachel Wall or Darlene Tarr, or whoever she needed to be, was probably still walking among us. And none of us could do anything about it. Someone had nailed the truth into an airtight vessel.

Wallace was cremated. At his request I alone spread his ashes in the meadow grass on Mitt Mountain on a clear and starry night.

###

Cal was bellied to the bar when I walked into the High Desert that cool June night Winona and I took Wallace to Mitt Mountain for the final time.

Winona had been running rough of late and had just returned from a check-up with Delight. An adjustment here and tweak there, and once again the old gal was running as smooth as a hand-rubbed finish on fine wood. On the ride back from Mitt Mountain I plumbed the depth of my understanding of the events of the last five years. I dug hard and deep; but, in the end, wasn't any closer to understanding or appreciating what had gone so wrong for my enigmatic friend who would admit guilt to save . I hadn't been particularly good company to anyone since Wallace died, failing to curb my gratuitous irritability and impatience. Pip told me *I was acting like a man with a baseball bat up his bum and that she'd just as soon keep her distance until I manage to pull it out.*

Cal looked over his shoulder at me as I took a seat at a table against the saloon wall. I nearly sat at the same table where Rachel and I were her last night, but checked my action just in time. I signaled for a beer. It was

nearing midnight, so except for a few flannel-clad diehards at the end of the bar in a shoulder-to-shoulder conversation, the saloon was empty.

Cal followed the waitress to my table, plopping heavily into the chair across from me with his beer in hand. He didn't appear to notice that a good amount of his drink had slopped over the side of the glass when he sat down. He wore a soiled white shirt and a pair of stained chinos. Cal smelled like a man who had compromised his life. "Is it done?" he asked. He blinked hard several times at his bloodshot eyes.

I nodded and, whether to distance myself from the man across the table specifically or the state of the day itself, leaned back as far as possible in my chair. Cal lowered his head and shook it from side to side. "Why'd he just want you there?" he asked sloppily. "Why didn't he want me there?"

I shrugged my response, truly not knowing why I was the sole attendee.

Cal rubbed the stubble on his chin. "I did my best with him, you know," he said. "God, he was a pistol when he was a kid. Followed me everywhere. He wanted to do

everything I did, share my friends. And you know what, Rufus? I goddamned loved it. Pretty fuckin' weird, huh? Having a little brother tagging around after me all the time," Cal said, close to tears.

"There was something about him. Something special," I said.

"What happened? What the hell happened to him?"

"Losing his parents in a devastating accident and being skewered by a bolt of lightning could have something to do with it," I suggested derisively.

"And all that bullshit about seeing Mom and Dad years after they were killed. Jesus, Rufus. I'm to blame," he said.

I surprised myself by wanting to assuage Cal's torment. "Wallace made his choices for some reason."

"It was a mistake to bring him and Bridey to Wind River," he said. "I should have moved us farther away so nobody could ever find us."

"Wind River didn't do this to him," I said firmly.

Cal stood shakily from his chair and steadied himself on the table. "I should have killed that bitch twenty years ago," he snarled and staggered out the door.

###

I loaded the six bullets into the chamber of Father's .357 Magnum in the semi-dark of the hotel lobby. Sitting in one of the wingback chairs at the fireplace, I had a clear view of the staircase. The four pounds of metal was nearly as big as my hand; its cool, smooth surface unfamiliar to my touch. Satisfied that my stubby index finger could manage the trigger, I concealed the revolver between me and the side of the chair. The six-foot grandfather clock Pip had shipped from our old home in New York stood in the corner of the lobby, its pendulum ticking away the seconds. Waiting is indeed a most arduous task.

Not until I arrived at the *Tribune* office some twenty minutes after Cal left the High Desert did the sudden and overwhelming avalanche of insight drop on me. *I should have killed the bitch twenty years ago*, Cal had said. *Farther away so nobody could ever find us*. He was referring to Darlene Tarr, Wind River's Rachel Wall. Al Blue had tracked her first tangle with the law to Portland, Oregon. The Kilcannons were an Oregon farm family. The curious familiarity Rachel displayed toward Cal and Wallace, her tenderness I witnessed toward Bridey. I knew there was a

connection between Rachel and the Kilcannons and that connection led to Wallace's destructive choice.

Bridey had told me that Cal had become an insomniac in recent years. Before she was married and moved out of the hotel, she'd hear Cal pacing back and forth in his room, then the squeak of his door opening and his descent into the lobby where he'd sit in one of the wingback chairs until first light. The grandfather clock Pip had shipped from our old home in New York stood in the corner of the lobby. Its hour chime sounded four times to mark the morning's early hour as Cal descended the stairs.

His bare feet slapped against the hardwood floor as he made his way toward the fireplace. I could make out that he still wore the same dirty shirt and chinos from earlier in the evening. It wasn't until he was within five feet of the revolver aimed at his chest that he saw what awaited him. He hesitated for an instant then sat in the chair opposite me.

Enough light filtered through the windows to make out the features of his face and his hands resting on the arms of the chair. He leaned his head against the back of the

chair; his face disappeared into the shadows of the chair's wings.

In an attempt to quell the roiling hatred inching toward the surface, I concentrated on the tick-tock of the clock in the corner. It had to be Cal's words that sliced our silence. The weight of the revolver was becoming ponderous in my hand. The Remington painting above the fireplace captured moonlight from somewhere. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the yellow and red of the Concord stagecoach flying down the mountain road, the silvery pistols of the highwaymen drawn in hot and hungry pursuit.

Two men who based their relationship on doubt and suspicion were moving toward trust. I trusted Cal would tell the truth; Cal trusted I'd kill him if he didn't. I watched his chest expand as he inhaled deeply and then deflate. He was ready.

"She and her mother lived in an old railroad lineman's house on the outskirts of the town where we grew up. Her mom worked nights at the café by the rail yard, but everybody knew she made her money whoring." Despite the fact Al had a gun pointed at his heart, his voice was remarkably calm as he settled into his story. "Darlene had

gone to the same elementary school as Wallace until the sixth grade when her mom got sick and she had to take care of her. She used to hang around our place now and then, helping Mother with chores to earn some extra money.

She bought a Brownie camera with her when she'd come to the farm. Took lots of photos of the whole family," he said.

His revelation hit like a hard right cross. The revered photograph Wallace carried in his wallet of Francis and Molly sitting together on the running board of their Ford, Cal standing next to them, and a melancholy Wallace kneeling in the foreground was taken by Darlene Tarr. It was her shadow cast upon the family portrait.

"She was a sweet little kid then. When the war broke out and I was shipped out, Mother wrote that Darlene and her mother just disappeared." Cal slowly leaned toward me, pulling his face from the shadows. He ran his hand through his hair and rubbed his face hard.

I cocked the hammer of the revolver and said, "There's more and you'd better get to it."

"There's more all right," Cal said leaning back into the shadow once again. "When our folks were killed and I

returned from the war, she showed up again. She wasn't a little kid any more. Wallace was recovering from the lightning strike at home. And since I had all the farm chores, it made sense that she move in with us to help care for him. She..."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Wallace didn't recognize Rachel as Darlene Tarr? Tell me how that was possible."

"Here's a kid who remembered everything before the lightning strike. Every detail of our lives. After he was injured it was only those old memories he held. The injury combined with our parents' death made it so Wallace couldn't, or wouldn't, remember a lot afterwards. And when Darlene showed up in Wind River she looked completely different."

"And yet you recognized her," I said.

"Took me awhile. She'd lost weight, changed her hair, the way she spoke. But she could never change that perverse charm. And then I saw *her* in the eyes of Rachel Wall."

"Wallace never tumbled to who she really was?" I asked.

Cal shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I don't think so." Cal's voice was weakening. He sounded tired, drained of what little and desperate energy he had.

With a slight movement of the pistol, I encouraged him to continue.

"Darlene did everything she could to get close to me. She wouldn't give up. What she tried to do in my mother's house was shameful. But Darlene finally got to me," he said.

"She tracked you here to Wind River and you killed her," I said. There was a long silence before Cal responded. I eased the hammer down.

"Harvey Scoffone killed her," he said.

"Bullshit."

"Leonard was having an affair with Darlene—Rachel Wall. How Harvey found out about it, I don't know. Darlene probably told him. Or Harvey caught them together. For all I know she was fucking the kid too. The night he killed her, Harvey had taken his father's station wagon and waited in the alley for Rachel to climb in. I suppose it was Leonard and Rachel's agreed upon rendezvous time and place.

Harvey forced poison down her, strangled her, and dumped her body in the lake."

"And Leonard chooses Wallace as a scapegoat for his son," I said.

"He thought he had the killer of his lover."

"Why'd Harvey have to kill her?" I asked.

"Why are you sitting there holding a gun on me for chrissake?" he said.

"Revenge, you son-of-a-bitch," I said.

"Harvey hated that his father was betraying his mother. Maybe he thought if he didn't kill Rachel he'd end up killing his father. Who the fuck knows?"

"And you know all of this how?"

"Wallace told me," he said. "He said our folks told him, but that's a pile of shit. I figure he witnessed it all and was just too scared to tell anyone."

"When," I demanded. "When did he tell you?"

"He'd been locked up for a year," Cal said.

The news took my breath away. I could feel the fury I had tethered to reason breaking its chain. My hand began to shake, my respirations increased, but the pistol was suddenly feather light. I wanted more than anything at that

moment to kill the bastard. I stood and leveled the pistol at his head. "A fucking year. You knew for a fucking year and you let Wallace sit there rotting away day to day." I cocked the hammer again. He'd taken away a man I loved more than my own life. He'd taken away the man I wanted to be. "You sonuvabitch."

Cal didn't resist. He relaxed his shoulders and closed his eyes. I pressed the pistol barrel hard into his forehead. He winced slightly. He wanted it. Cal said calmly, "Wallace said he knew Thelma couldn't take the news her son was a killer. He said he knew Harvey would die in Vietnam."

"Rufus, you don't want to do this." It was Pip's voice, muted as if far away. She stood at the banister at the top of the stairs.

I kept my focus on Cal's forehead and the barrel of the pistol. "Stay out of this," I yelled.

"Wallace Kilcannon is standing next to you, Rufus Dandee," she said.

The Epilogue According to Rufus Dandee

There was so much more Cal told Pip and me that night in the hotel lobby thirty years ago. So much that couldn't be shared until now.

I would hope you are sufficiently interested in some of the Wind Riverians you've come to know a little during the course of these meanderings. The sweetest lyric in this serenade comes from Bridey and Al, to whom I gifted the property I bought from Cledamae as a wedding present. They built a beautiful home on the creek, had two rascally boys, and the grandest girl to come down the road since Bridey Kilcannon herself. Al retired as sheriff two years ago.

Cledamae Howell, Herbert Woodcock, Leonard and Thelma Scoffone are long gone. The Bodine Brothers are still around, but keep pretty much to themselves these days. Some folks say Frankie Bodine had some kind of religious awakening and dragged his brothers along to salvation—kicking and screaming, I'll bet. Steve Luehrs married the big-breasted gal from the hardware store. I have no idea where they are. Despite years of insistence matrimony whether holy or base was not for her, Delight Daggett

married an auto parts salesman from the Midwest. She's living in Nebraska now, quite happily I believe. I hear from her at Christmas.

My opinion of Ardis Dardanelle softened over the years. We all watched as she stuck with Cal through his depression and alcoholism, and she very obviously never expected anything in return. It's nice to know that kind of devotion can navigate its way through all the land mines in a rutted life path. Ardis held Cal's hand as he lay dying last year.

And the news Cal shared with us that night thirty years ago? The three of us held the secret these many years, but it's time. Cal told us how Darlene Tarr seduced a naive Wallace once he had recuperated sufficiently from his injuries. Cal came upon them in the barn just after the deed had been done, Darlene at Wallace's side buttoning her blouse, a wry smile on her face.

By the time the pregnancy began to show, Cal figured out what she'd done. She couldn't have Cal outright so she insinuated herself into his life the only way she knew how. Cal shipped her off to Seattle to have the baby. When the baby was born Cal brought her home with him and concocted

the story about the woman he dated and the baby he fathered. He threatened Darlene if she were ever to come close to his family again he wouldn't be responsible for what he did. I suppose riding a wave of successful crime, she came to Wind River seeking the one thing she couldn't get.

How much easier life would have been if Cal had admitted that Bridey was Wallace's daughter. Darlene Tarr wouldn't have turned up in Wind River to blackmail Cal, Harvey wouldn't have killed her, and Wallace wouldn't have sacrificed his freedom for the sake of a mother's heart. He said it did it all to protect his family. Ultimately, what did he protect them from?

Winona was put out to pasture. I've become so crippled with arthritis and blind with cataracts that I could no longer manage her. She's in Bridey and Al's barn beneath a tarp. God, she was a beauty. And faithful to the end.

Obviously, if you're reading this my body has gotten the better of me and I'm gone. I took a page from my great-grandmother Virgil Caulfield Erlewine and saved these last revelations for my passing. As my attorney and executor of my will, I know you will carry out my wishes as stipulated.

Beatrice Pippin Dandee continues to this day to reside at the Caulfield Hotel. She is 101 years old this year and though she has some limitations, is as Pip-like as ever. She never abandoned me. When she saw how fast I was failing these last few months, she spoke the only words of complaint I ever heard pass her lips. "Damn it, Rufus," she said. "Why am I always the one left behind?"

Rufus Dandee

Wind River, Washington

March 20, 2001

References

The Righteous Brothers. "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'." *Phillies*, 1964.